

**Internet Killed the Michelin Star:
The Motives of Narrative and Style in Food Text Creation on Social Media**

by

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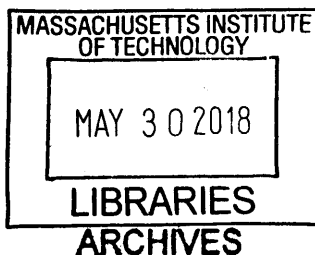
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Submitted to the Program in Comparative Media Studies/Writing in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Comparative Media Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Abstract: Digital representations of food (food texts) have become mainstream content on social media sites and digital streaming sites. While they accomplish some similar goals to their analog counterparts (e.g. in-print cookbooks), like communicating information about the food's preparation or what its consumption would be like, the surplus of food texts has been ushered in by a transformation of media infrastructure such as the internet, cameras on cheap mobile phones, and digital social network platforms. The creators of the bulk of food texts have shifted from authority figures in the field to anyone who dines out and goes online. With this shift in media ownership comes a change in status—from expert to everyone. As a result, the dynamics of food discourse has also changed. I use interviews and ethnographies with fine dining chefs, food industry professionals, and media makers to illustrate these convergences and divergences in the creation and consumption of food texts today.

TL;DR: While the underlying purpose of the construction and consumption of food texts remain the same from analog to digital form, the authority of food culture and its complimentary narrative control has shifted as a result of the convergence of food texts and digital media affordances.

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Food has been a passion of mine since a young age along with the future and technology of it. I want to begin by thanking my parents, Michelle and Geoffrey Zeamer, for constantly feeding my curiosity for these topics as well as lovingly pushing these curiosities of mine further and showing how to productively inquire about the world around me. My siblings, Abby and Ben, have also been victim to my research musings and kvetching, so I am sending them some love as well.

I want to thank my partner, Marc Exposito Gomez, for dealing with me and my frizzy hair in moments of inspiration and writer's block in addition to dealing with me in moments of culinary inspiration and moments of culinary disappointment. I'm still sorry for the overly salty and too-umami brisket I fed you. Also, remember that time we dropped half of our monthly stipends after-rent on a dinner at Alinea and we left hungry? There will be more delicious smoky pork belly in our futures. I promise!

The academic folks around me have helped to shape my mind storm of ideas and interests into a coherent study of media technologies and a subculture, Western popular food culture. To Professor Uricchio, we both seemed to struggle to make clear my ideas and feelings about food and media infrastructure, and I believe that this confusion helped the work become more coherent. At least, I hope this work is more crystalized than it was when we first discussed this research a year and a half ago. We will see... To Dr. Baym, Professor Brinkema, and Professor Hendershot, thank you all for appeasing my food and media studies hunger and making every effort to help me explore the questions that I found intriguing. To Professor Lisa Parks, thank you for the moral support as well as the spectrum of academic research support and guidance you have given me over the past two years. While my research was not always aligned with yours, your sincerity and depth in helping me got me through this program has been significant to my success.

My research would not have been possible without the cooperation of food industry professionals and restaurants. In particular, Mugaritz of Basque Country and the State Park/Mamaleh's/Café du Pays family of Cambridge have felt like my food industry family for the past few years.

Aside from home and work, third spaces have filled a few holes in my heart. The Muddy Charles, the student pub at MIT by the river, has been a welcoming community for me to relax and work hard within. I am forever grateful for such spaces on campus. A little closer to my [physical] home is Bukowski Tavern in Cambridge, which has appeased my late-night work sessions by way of conversation and tater tots. When writing about food and its cultural appendages, these spaces prove themselves as crucial as the Michelin Starred institutions for happiness and inspiration.

In terms of food studies support, I want to call out a few folks. LinYeeYaun and Sam Sylvander have been some of the fellow-food and social media obsessed women who have helped me to develop my questions, content, and arguments by way of discussion, research support, and example.

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Introduction:

Digital Disruption of the Physical Restaurant Industry

I grew up watching in a middle-class Boston suburb a lot of TV while my dad stayed at home building his own company and my mom was at work. My ideal summer vacation days would begin by waking up and putting on PBS or Food Network for 1-2 hours before deciding what to do for the rest of the day. Julia Child and reputable chefs on *Cooking with Master Chefs*: Hosted by Julia Child taught me about all of the dishes that I would most certainly need to know how to cook for myself one day in the future [when I became an adult], while Ina Garten on *The Barefoot Contessa* inspired me with simple yet delicious dishes that I could likely make on my own in some variation. I would then turn off the TV, put on my apron, grab a basket, and go out into the garden in pursuit of the best-looking zucchinis and leaves of basil. When I got back inside, I would go on the computer and look on a site like Epicurious for a recipe to print out and then place in my very own recipe binder. The television show provided the inspiration where the internet recipe provided the execution. Each food text, or a media representation of food, served a purpose within the course of my own understanding of myself and my relationship to food, and more broadly, culture, and the roles of the texts continued to shift over time.

When it was a birthday, the whole family would get into the beige minivan and head to one of the family favorite suburban chain restaurants, either Bugaboo Creek House or Johnny Rocket's if we were going to the mall. The first time I actually ate a Chili's was when I was in middle school and my friends and I dined there alone after our parents dropped us off to see a movie in the same strip mall. Getting the chance to dine in an famous Chili's was more exciting than any movie I could have seen at the time. I thought about how I had seen the commercials of 'Nsync singing about Baby Back Ribs in 2002 during the Golden Globes, and I had only heard rumors of sizzling fajitas from friends, so eating here for the first time was my taste of the widely-advertised fine dining and independence.¹ Fine dining, in this case, was relative. Dining in a middle-level chain

¹ Kate Macarthur, "N SYNC SINGS FOR CHILI'S BABY BACK RIBS." AdAge, January 17, 2002. <http://adage.com/article/news/n-sync-sings-chili-s-baby-back-ribs/33632/>.

restaurant was more glamorous than grabbing sandwiches at a convenience store near my house, and less intimidating than feeling out of place in a fancy restaurant.

These “Middlebrow Chains” have since fallen out of fashion in a time when eating and drinking establishments are doing increasingly well. It seems that it is not just me that has fallen out of love with the comfort of standardized suburban chains, but most of the Americans dining out. Eater (a prominent online food magazine) looked at SEC filings from five popular U.S. chain restaurants to track how they have grown and declined over the past 17 years. Applebee’s, Chili’s, Olive Garden, Red Lobster, and Ruby Tuesday have all seen a decrease in growth over that time period. More specifically, many of the chains have been forced to either be acquired, sold-off, or face complete rebranding in order to battle the slump in sales and growth.²

While these chains face serious changes or bankruptcy, data from the US Census Bureau shows that U.S. retail spending on eating and drinking outside of the home surpassed spending on groceries for the first time in 2016. And according to the USDA, only 25.9% of U.S. household food expenditure in 1970 was for food away from the home, while in 2012, it is closer to 43.1%.³ These statistics point to a growing trend of US consumers embracing eating out more while disavowing the standardized chain. One can hypothesize that these numbers also point to a growing interest in unique food experiences.

As the nature of media representations of food morphed from analog to digital, it also enlarged the opportunity for me to become an active participant in this greater food culture. There was a certain reflexivity about engaging with food culture via media in the days of Web 1.0— for example, the way I learned to cook was a trans-media experience. I could watch a recipe be prepared on the television, then go online and print out the recipe for my 3-ring binder of recipes, prepare the dish, then go back online to leave comments on how the dish turned out. Of course, my privilege of having an internet connection, cable subscription, a printer in my house, and a solid supply of food in my house certainly enabled me to have this sort of experience.

With this disposition in mind, it was possible, and has become increasingly easy for a middle-class kid from the suburbs of the United States, equipped with only an internet connection, to get deeply entrenched in producing and consuming food texts

² Vince Dixon, “Chains Timeline.” Eater.com, October 3, 2017. <https://www.eater.com/a/chains-timeline>.

³ Matt Phillips, “No One Cooks Anymore.” Quartz (blog), June 14, 2016. <https://qz.com/706550/no-one-cooks-anymore/>.

representing the world of fine dining and a globalized food culture. *What were the affordances of the media that I interacted with that gave me a view and knowledge of a food world outside of suburban chain restaurants and my family's cooking? How did my upbringing as a digital native influence what food-related information I was able to access, and how did this ultimately shape my own relationship to food?* My hope is that by teasing out the details of my own experiences and perspectives with media representations of food mediated by the internet, I can draw a larger picture of digital media transformation within the food industry. *I argue that the experience of access to greater food culture through digital media has shifted the control of the narrative of food texts from the expert to one of the mainstream diner. Furthermore, as a result of the increased media channels of digitally accessible food texts, the roles and expectations of both diners and chefs in restaurants will continue to transform.* In particular, I track the transitions from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 of food texts, but also how these media channels are being used to regain control of the narrative.

In order to document this shift in food culture and food texts, I bring together archival media artifacts, interviews with social media producers and consumers, ethnographies with a variety of chefs and diners, and the insights of food industry insiders, to show how technology and food culture interact with one another.

I will focus on the time between the advent of the World Wide Web and current times as told through the witnessing of specific events and individuals that demonstrate transformational moments in food culture related to technological innovation. In particular, my methodology is based in analyzing visual representations and the other media in which they circulate through such as social media of food from the people who created and consumed these food texts.

My research draws on in-depth inquiries into the norms and practices of social media users who identify themselves as food text creators. This included interviews with and content survey of bloggers, ranging from early Web 2.0 bloggers to more contemporary Instagram bloggers, and other food text creators who are not established as chefs with well-regarded restaurants.

Moreover, I interviewed, did site visits, and performed digital ethnographies on a handful of exemplary restaurants and their chefs from the top 100 restaurants in the world, as cited by industry-accepted "The World's 50 Best Restaurants" 2017 list, which

actually lists the 100 “best” restaurants.⁴ I chose a limited number of chefs in for survey because they are notable indicators of larger movements. Despite the dominance and perceived importance of “The World’s 50 Best Restaurants” in to fine dining institutions worldwide, the list has often been criticized for being biased towards affluent white male-run institutions on the Western world versus a more diverse global survey which would better represent chefs of all genders, ethnicities, and socio-economic clientele of Latin America, Asia, and Africa.⁵ By relying on these established hierarchies of taste, I make no claim to representational accuracy, but rather take up and analyze the discourses of dominance. Additionally, gaining access for academic research to some chefs remains difficult to attain, so I tried my best to include as diverse as a range of possible restaurants from this list but faced structural barriers that prevented me from doing just that. That is to say, some restaurants explicitly stated that they did not want to partake in this type of research, and therefore I only was able to speak personally with chefs who were more open about their experiences with digital media. As a dominant system within food industry and culture, fine dining is well articulated not only institutionally but also representationally (ratings, magazines, newspaper reviews, websites, etc.).⁶ However, the digital ethnographies and secondary media sources enables observation into the actions of chefs as media producers. I believe that the practices, impacts, and attitudes of culinary institutions that are admired and accepted within the food industry can be drawn by looking at this handful of influential chefs.

In the end, my goal is to shed some light on how the symbolic enrichment of food has been amplified by digital social media so that now many people feel compelled to take and share a photo of their food before they taste it, and what role digital media and the internet has played in enabling this food text production shift. That is, my survey is an exemplary one, not exhaustive.

With all of this in mind, my inquiry is into what is a dominant class, as these are the food forms that are most circulated across social media, blogs, magazines, and television. Additionally, the dominant class of food culture is that which is most subject

⁴ “The World’s 50 Best Restaurants 1-50, 2017.” The World’s 50 Best Restaurants. Accessed February 12, 2018. <https://www.theworlds50best.com/list/1-50-winners>.

⁵ Ryan Sutton, “What’s Wrong With the 2017 World’s 50 Best Restaurants List.” Eater, April 6, 2017. <https://www.eater.com/worlds-50-best-restaurants-awards/2017/4/6/15197286/worlds-50-best-subs-restaurants-analysis>.

⁶ Christel Lane. *The Cultivation of Taste: Chefs and the Organization of Fine Dining*. Reprint edition. Oxford University Press, 2016.

to critical review and has a prominent an institutional presence. I hope to use this study of critical food studies through a media lens, to look into the systematic discourse of a community that is filled with abundant examples of popular media engagements. That is to say, fine dining is a well-developed system, but it is certainly not representative of “everyone’s” everyday food experiences within Western culture. I hope that by starting with one of the most institutionalized food cultures and its entanglements, greater questions of taste formations and observations on distinction in relation to food cultures will emerge.

Overall, I will look at the implications for food of the larger shift in authority (control over narrative) and textual production enabled by the digital era and its platforms

Making Food Texts from Food Objects

Historically, people who cook food have been the ones who told stories about their own food. Home cooks circulated their own recipes as a part of their identity and significance, and by the late 20th centuries, celebrity chefs emerged and did the same.

When food is discussed, why does the story even matter? Isn’t it about the taste and the nutrients it provides to the eater? And moreover, what makes a good meal? Is it entirely subjective, or can it be reduced to a framework? Can food be understood by understanding the pieces that make up the whole or is it to only be interpreted by the combination of all of its elements together?

There have been a few efforts to compare food, meals, and restaurants on an objective scale through frameworks for assessment, but no one system seems to be able to fully describe the experience of food. At the micro level, the Scoville Scale attempts to quantify the spiciness of a pepper by using volumetric dilutions of pepper extracts in water until it is no longer spicy to a human’s taste buds. For example, Tabasco sauce has 2,500-5,000 Scoville Heat Units (SHU) which means it takes roughly 5,000 cups of water to dilute 1 cup of tobacco sauce until it does not taste hot anymore to a human.⁷ On the macro level, there is the Michelin star system which is less scientific but more capitalistic in motivation. The scale ranges from one to three stars,

⁷ Twillight Greenaway, “How Hot Is That Pepper? How Scientists Measure Spiciness.” Smithsonian. Accessed February 19, 2018. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-hot-is-that-pepper-how-scientists-measure-spiciness-884380/>.

one meaning “worth a stop [on a travel]” while three means “worth a special journey.”⁸ However, just being awarded one star is an honor as being “graced” by a star is reserved for exceptional restaurants that meet a high bar for quality, reputation, and often political agreement.

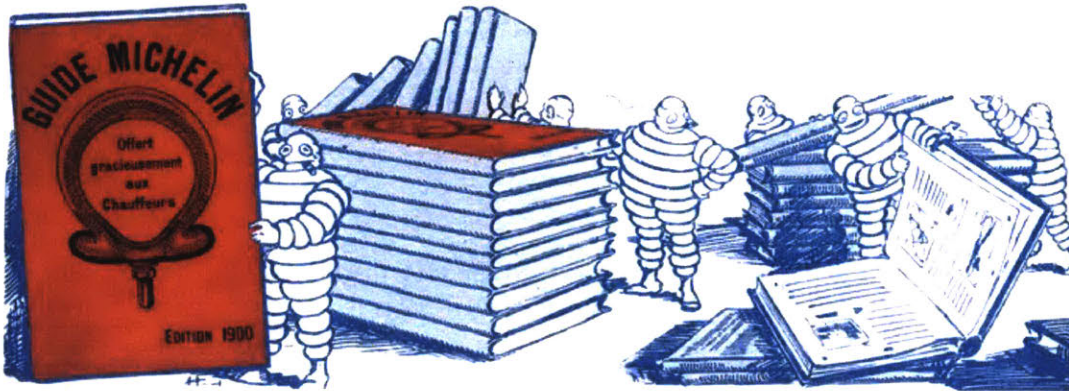


Figure 1: The Michelin Guide was created in 1920 by the French tire company as a way to inspire people to drive more across France. In 2018, the guide has rated over 30,000 restaurants across three continents.⁹

Then, somewhere in the middle, there are the number of stars a restaurant becomes attached to via crowdsourced reviews on websites like Yelp. On Yelp users write brief anecdotes of their meal and assign a star-value, ranging from 1 being the worst to 5 being the best, to the restaurant as a whole. Yelp reviews, in this sense, are strong in their aggregation of taking multiple subjective experiences and quantifying them to “agreement” (or average) reception, while it is weak in its tendency to reduce diverse dining establishments to all be compared on the same crowd-sourced stage.

As Anthony Bourdain pointed out in *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook*, the joy of food is a combination of factors that cannot be reduced to bullet points along a framework scorecard. Bourdain, the recognizable force behind mainstream television shows such as *No Reservations* on the Travel Channel and *Parts Unknown* on CNN, acts as the patron saint of putting a socio-cultural lens on the complex world of food via visual media. His perspective encompasses decades of experience in both the professional food industry and the professional entertainment industry and he goes onto chart the intersection between the two

⁸ “To the Stars and Beyond.” MICHELIN Guide. Accessed February 19, 2018. <https://guide.michelin.com/us/new-york/to-the-stars-and-beyond>.

⁹ “About Us.” MICHELIN Guide. Accessed February 19, 2018. <https://guide.michelin.com/us/new-york/news?id=about-us>.

industries clearly. With this intersection marked, he still has his own perspective on what makes a good meal. Alinea, Per Se, and other top American Michelin Star restaurants, he recalled, failed to leave him joyful at the end of the meal. But why?

At the end of the day, would a good and useful criterion for evaluating a meal be 'Was it fun?' Meaning: after many courses of food, sitting in the taxi on the way home, when you ask yourself or your dinner companion, 'Was that a good time?' is the answer a resounding 'Yes! Yes! My God, yes!'—or would it, on balance, have been more fun spending the evening at home on the couch with a good movie and a pizza?¹⁰

Despite this negative impression, Bourdain does not disavow Grant Achatz's, the head chef of Alinea, standing as a reputable chef. He admits that Achatz has what he considers to be the most impressive resume in terms of commitment to craft, experimentation, and innovation. "There's really no one," Bourdain confesses, "who's demonstrated so consistently, or been willing to sacrifice so much [for his art]."¹¹

However, when it comes to food, the full story of meals cannot be simplified into any of these metric frameworks or rankings of innovative techniques and flavors. The lists emerge as deeply subjective as perspective differs from person to person, from tongue to tongue. But then why do people continue to attempt to fit food-related experiences along certain frameworks that call out certain aspects of the experience but not the others?

These attempts represent a desire to control the narrative of food-related experiences through an establishment of authority. According to the Ancient Greek definition of narration, "diagesis," as told by Michel de Certeau, "narration establishes an itinerary (it 'guides') and it passes through (it 'transgresses')" therefore it diverges from description by having a purpose in and by way of its direction of movement.¹² In other words, narrative changes chronology into a series of events with clear cause and effect, or plot.¹³

¹⁰ Anthony Bourdain, *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook*. Reprint edition. New York: Ecco, 2011. 197.

¹¹ Anthony Bourdain, *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook*. Reprint edition. New York: Ecco, 2011. 152.

¹² Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*. Reprint edition. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002. 246.

¹³ Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney, eds. *Storytelling Sociology: Narrative As Social Inquiry*. Illustrated Edition edition. Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2004. 4.

Therefore, when looking at food texts and their usage of narrative, I will be looking at those texts that are created with a purpose rather than a description. The purpose can be inferred from the food text itself, but is more often than not determined by the contextual usage of that food text within a broader narrative built through content on digital platforms. I will elaborate more on the usage of food texts as self-representing tools of users in Chapter 2.

A narrative is a culturally situated text. The reception of a narrative, as Livia Polanyi describes, is determined greatly by the cultural perspective the interpreter employs to determine the meaning of a text. Thus, a story's meaning greatly depends on the values and beliefs that are not only being communicated but also interpreted based on the context and the interpreters' cultural stance.¹⁴ Polanyi describes the structure of stories as including main components of "details of encoding the various proponents of what went on when and why."¹⁵ Cultures and values, therefore, emerge as the motivators of storytelling and determiners of story-interpreting. I will, however, be focusing on the production component of storytelling, with a few nods to reception and interpretation but not much more than that.

As such, stories are forms of inquiries which can be rejected or validated by listeners who may try to make one person's stories compatible with one's own stories.¹⁶ In the scheme of social media engagement, an example of this is how users use the validation of their content production (such as photos or statuses) as validation of their own sense of self-identity.¹⁷

Storytelling is not only a mode of cultural communication but also a ritual that has the power to turn tangible objects into enchanted mythologies. The quote below, from Christopher Morley's *Parnassus on Wheel*, describes the power of a book.

Lord! When you sell a man a book you don't sell him just
twelve ounces of paper and ink and glue—you sell him a
whole new life. Love and friendship and humour and ships

¹⁴ Livia Polanyi, *Telling the American Story: A Structural and Cultural Analysis of Conversational Storytelling*. Cambridge, Mass London: The MIT Press, 1989. 9-10.

¹⁵ Polanyi, 2.

¹⁶ Ronald J. Berger and Richard Quinney, eds. *Storytelling Sociology: Narrative As Social Inquiry*. Illustrated Edition edition. Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2004. 4-5.

¹⁷ Helmut Appel, Alexander L Gerlach, and Jan Crusius. "The Interplay between Facebook Use, Social Comparison, Envy, and Depression." *Current Opinion in Psychology, Social media and applications to health behavior*, 9, no. Supplement C (June 1, 2016): 44–49.

at sea by night—there’s all heaven and earth in a book, in a real book I mean.¹⁸

Now let’s take this quote and change a few of the words.

Lord! When you sell a man a burger you don’t sell him just twelve ounces of beef and cheese and bacon—you sell him a whole new life. Love and friendship and humour and ships at sea by night—there’s all heaven and earth in [eating] a burger, in a real burger I mean.¹⁹

In the original book quote from Morley, a book is a porthole into a world similar to heaven—where one is concerned only about enriching social connections such as love and friendship. Food, in my remixed version, also acts as a symbol of “more” than its material manifestation. More specifically, *food is ubiquitous but understated in its usage (that is, not explicitly) as a symbol of people’s positioning within society and specifically access (economics), choice and taste (education and cultural awareness), and health (ability to commit resources to one’s own well-being, so also economic)*. Some fine dining chefs understand his own culinary creative process as one of building a dish based on external, and extrinsically social, perspectives (Figure 2). Food is, therefore, dialogic as it exists in conversations of sorts among the maker and receiver, the chef, and the public.

¹⁸ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. 1 edition. Boston: Mariner Books, 2013. 1.

¹⁹ Ibid.

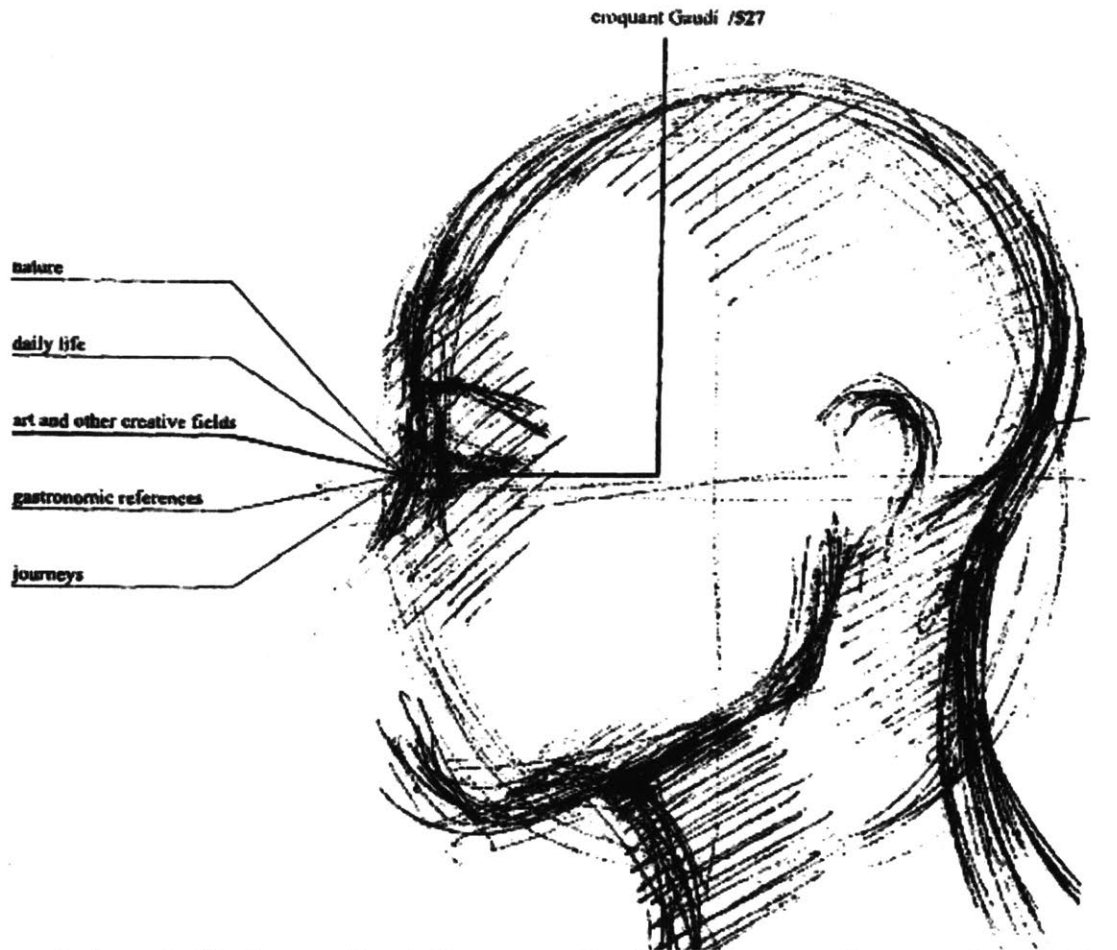


Figure 2: Ferran Adrià's diagram of inspiration process, "Inspiration: Ideas come from aspects related to gastronomy, art, nature, etc." These ideas, as shown in the diagram, can include "nature, daily life, art and other creative fields, gastronomic references, journeys" and result in, for example, "Croquant Gaudi" (Source: Hamilton, Richard, Ferran Adria, and Brett Littman. *Ferran Adria: Notes on Creativity*. New York, NY: The Drawing Center, 2014.)

This sentiment echoes Pierre Bourdieu's theory of taste in which consumption of artifacts can reflect a person's position within class and society. In particular, Bourdieu declares consumption as a way of communicating in that it decodes, deciphers, and assumes a capacity to fully understand a set of codes or ciphers. In other words, one can better appreciate something for which they are equipped with the tools to perceive and decipher. For example, a work of art has more meaning for someone that understands the cultural forces that have shaped the processes and creation of that art—for others, it may just be paint on a canvas. Thus, possession of cultural competence, which is a code, gives way to decoding.²⁰

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, 1 edition (London: Routledge, 1986). XXV.

When these narratives exist within the digital media realm, they take on a series of distinctive properties. Marie-Laure Ryan describes a series of five properties, of which all narratives told through digital media can have one or more of these properties. For digital food texts, the properties of “networking capabilities” and “modularity” reflect the unique experience digital food texts enable within a greater food culture. With networking capabilities, people are connected together in a virtual environment by way of their machines, and therefore, can act as a multi-user and distributed system in “real-time” or delayed communications. For example, take Instagram communities that emerge out of usage of the same hashtag. Users can post and engage with their own and others’ content live, or by looking back at past engagements with the platform. Then there is modularity, which describes how digital works can be made up of many autonomous objects, and therefore these objects can be used in various contexts and configurations, transformations, and combinations. For example, rapid recipe videos can be viewed in many different contexts with different intents, like scrolling through a Facebook News Feed or a result from a Google search on how to prepare a certain type of food.²¹ Digital food texts consequently are often accessed by multiple-connected-users in various forms and functions.

In the same vein, one of the struggles of studying food and culture is that because many people eat a few times a day, many people feel as though they are experienced eaters and therefore experts on all things food. Almost everyone takes a side food on matters based on countless meals, both the preparation (from ordering a meal to cooking it themselves) and the consumption (liking or not liking, feeling reinvigorated or feeling sick after eating a certain dish). Think of how strongly people feel “in the right” about their status as a vegan or a carnivore, or as someone who eats only organic meat and drinks only de-ionized water. Try to untangle the political and economic forces that go into how people “choose” what to eat, from picking up a pre-packaged snack at the bodega to picking up a weekly farm share from the neighborhood co-op. That is to say, *food has the ability to be universal and yet polarizing, ubiquitous and yet conspicuous*. The study of food and its culture is deeply nuanced and can be viewed differently based on the perspective of the specific diner, and therefore, their story. Despite these implications, food remains as a “safe” topic for discussion with

²¹ Marie-Laure Ryan, “Will New Media Produce New Narratives?” In *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, 338. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

Americans, in contrast to politics or religion. However, this safe zone can be diminished by bringing health, ethics, or economics into the discussion. With this in mind, the taste and nature of food is accepted as being different from person to person as shown through many different widely known idioms such as “de gustibus non est disputandum” and “chacun à son goût,” all roughly translating “to each their own taste.”²²

Food emerges as a rich space for interpersonal communication and identity formation as it is deeply nuanced and varied. Accordingly, these complexities are not a bug but a feature of food and its socio-cultural positioning. The nuances of food and its culture create an ecosystem of discourse that is ever-changing, fueled by the crucial role food plays in both our basic human need to eat and our cultural pressure to find meaning and purpose within our lives.

Yes, this scale of the importance of food may appear melodramatic, but the interpretive experience of food is melodramatic. This classification of mainstream food culture as melodramatic arises out of inquiries of other genres of excess, specifically Linda Williams’s discussion of melodrama and its “lapses in realism, by excesses of spectacle.”²³ In particular, food culture diverges from one of the main purposes of food being a means for sustenance, therefore in excess of food consumption for human survival. Food culture therefore is marking a space for exploration of the excess—people often enjoy the act of eating, but food culture is going beyond consumption of food in order to craft a narrative of the both socio-cultural and emotional significances of food and consumption.

As I will explore in this thesis, *popular food culture today in the West stands out as fueled by visual aesthetics as displayed through photos and content on social media, which convey certain narratives, leading to potential for growth in experience-based social capital. In particular, I will look at the implications for food of the larger shift in authority (control over narrative) and textual production enabled by the digital era and its platforms.* I find that the authority for the creation of mainstream discourse surrounding dining-out food culture in the United States has shifted from globally renowned master chefs to social media users. This parallels the shifting dynamics of other cultural sectors. As a response, chefs who were once seen as behind the curtain means of food production

²² Livia Polanyi, *Telling the American Story: A Structural and Cultural Analysis of Conversational Storytelling*. Cambridge, Mass London: The MIT Press, 1989. 129-130.

²³ Linda Williams. “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.” *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4, Summer 1991. 3.

are now actively engaging with food text production via digital channels, therefore to wider audiences, in order to maintain their own voice within food's increasingly diffused discourse. So, while the number of food texts that are being created and circulated has never been larger, the authority for sparking discourse about these food texts has become increasingly diluted. In other words, food texts are in a position to amplify the perspective of their creator while simultaneously being drowned out by the sheer volume of discourse.

That is, it is not about the food itself as much as what the food says about the person creating the food text. Food, as both a figurative and metaphorical entity, has been richly encoded to communicate symbols such as cultural identity, sustenance, power dynamics, and social significance.²⁴

With that said, there is a difference between what stories people tell others and what stories people tell themselves, and this difference can be illustrated through food text creation and engagement. For example, a study into the content creation and engagement of food photos on Instagram showed that users posted more photos of and followed more accounts about healthy foods while "liking" more photos of unhealthy food. "Liking" a social media post can be seen as a peer validation of the message being communicated by the content creator. So, while another user is not verbally contributing dialogue to the content itself, such as a written comment, the user is indeed taking place in the conversation being had through the social media posting. This harkens back to Polanyi's analysis of conversational listening mechanisms, and the usage of signs of appreciation of the relevance of what the story being told is about through, "Nods, minimal responses, laughter, and comments to express interest, sympathy, or surprise."²⁵ Therefore, "likes" and short comments on social media can be seen as ways in which users engage in digital conversations.

The divergence in activity between the posting of healthy food texts but engaging with unhealthy food texts depicts a mainstream desire of users to project a story of themselves as a health-conscious person if they are the one controlling the narrative while, perhaps internally, users still fantasize about unhealthy foods and validate these

²⁴ David Howes, *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink*. Edited by Carolyn Korsmeyer. 2 edition. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

²⁵ Livia Polanyi, *Telling the American Story: A Structural and Cultural Analysis of Conversational Storytelling* (Cambridge, Mass London: The MIT Press, 1989).

alternative narratives through their own engagements.²⁶ One of the reason society has not accepted a solely soylent diet is not because people could not physically handle it, but because people tend to enjoy the varying interpretive experience of eating a variety of foods. Society, culture, and the people that make up those webs enjoy the melodramatic nature of food. For example, back to Bourdain...

This is a sophisticated and deceptively subtle thing, Hanoi pho. I pretend to not fully understand and appreciate its timeless beauty. Here, describing pho as more like love than sex would be more accurate—as there is simply not enough time on this planet, I think, to ever truly know it. It is an unconditional kind of love, in that it doesn't matter where you enjoy it—elevated only a few feet off a dirty street corner or at the sleekly designed counter of an over decorated lounge. It contains, like the man said, 'multitudes.'²⁷

Memories of a special meal have a way to grab onto minds and hearts faster than they can travel through our gastrointestinal system.²⁸ The food is able to trigger memories and complimentary nuances of experiences that make politics or geography feel one-dimensional in comparison. The richness is often unparalleled except for the memory triggered by a familiar scent somewhere of a sweet summer day or the actions sandwiching news of a crucial moment in time. Food, however, includes all of these senses: smells, place, tastes, time, and action. The socio-cultural component of food also ties into part of how people interpret their experiences with food, whether it is a nostalgic meal their mother would make for them or a new flavor profile presented by a meal in a far-off land. *These deep contrasts amongst the components of the interpretive experience of food are what makes food so well positioned to become a fascinating part of our lives.*

Establishing definitions for the different parts of the process of creating and consuming food-focused experiences is important in order to dissect the different points of divergence and convergence amongst food, media representations of food, and the impact of these representations (Figure 3). When I talk about food, I will specifically be

²⁶ Yelena Mejova, Sofiane Abbar, and Hamed Haddadi. "Fetishizing Food in Digital Age: #foodporn Around the World." International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM), March 1, 2016.

²⁷ Anthony Bourdain, *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook*. Reprint edition. New York: Ecco, 2011.

²⁸ David E. Sutton, Daniel Miller, and Paul Gilroy. *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. 2nd ed. edition. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001.

referring to the food object as a physical form. The interface of food, however, can either be understood as a created form of that food, either physical or digital. This can include a meal, a snack, or even a food text, which is a media-representation of food. Then there is the consumption of these interfaces, which is an interpretative experience of the food as mediated by the interface, complete with sensorial, emotional, and socio-cultural components.

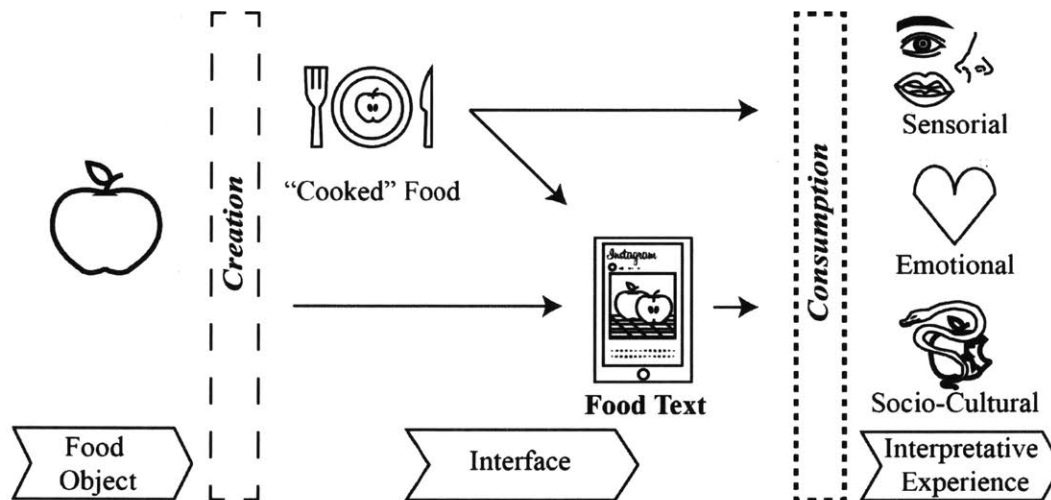


Figure 3: Process of creating and consuming food-focused experiences is linear, but can also be reciprocal as the interpretative experiences can shape how one approached a food object in the future.

Within this thesis, I will be exploring the representation and communication of food texts from analog to digital formats and their complementary changing infrastructure (e.g. the internet, mobile phones with cameras) and the consequential cultural shifts. In other words, in regards to Figure 3, I will be looking at how the creation process of food texts is shaped and the socio-cultural impacts of these changes. How has food culture been changed by the mass adaptation of the internet and the resulting ease of widespread digital media content production and circulation? In particular, we see a user-centric change in food culture enabled by usage of the World Wide Web.

The food industry scaled differently in the digital realm due to its material constraints. Representations of food in media have characteristics that do not scale as well as the content of other industries do. How do you digitally circulate aspects of taste and texture in a visually driven digital ecosystem? The information economy that has mounted off of news and entertainment has been affected in other ways, as ideas scale

more easily through written words than flavors and scents do. With this tension in mind, for the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on the creation and consumption of food texts from both a consumer-centric (bottom-up) and a chef-centric (top-down) perspectives. In other words, the way people are telling stories about food through digital media are shifting the culture around food.

But what are the stories being told about food through digital media? How are these stories incubated by the affordances of digital media? The main developmental change I point to in the creation and consumption process of food texts is the shift from the creators of these food texts being a few experts to now almost anyone equipped with the proper digital infrastructure. However, with this shift from one to many also comes a trade in status; food texts are not just the examples of perfection stemming from a point of authority, or high culture, but now one of easier access to both the creation process and more widely distributed food texts, or low culture. To illustrate this shift, I will explore the world of digital food texts created by the mainstream diners and then compare the norms and perceived struggles with those of food industry professionals (chefs), ones who were once seen as the finest of producers of food texts.

Navigating this Thesis

Chapter 1 - How Popular Food Culture Got an Internet Boost: The World Wide Web Catches Eaters' Attention

Analog media enabled the communication of similar information and offered similar interactions to today's digital media. Nancy Baym argues that all media is inherently social, and the modern tendency to call out digital interactive media as "social media" is one that arose out of the ability of individuals to profit more greatly from these digital behaviors (e.g. targeted advertising based on internet usage history).²⁹ Further, the power of broader modes of media production, dissemination, and consumption to change norms and authority over information is a pattern that has played out in various

²⁹ Nancy K. Baym, "Social Media and the Struggle for Society." *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 1 (April 29, 2015): 2056305115580477. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115580477>.

subcultures, from audio recording clubs in the 1960s to DIY photography.^{30, 31}

Specifically, the advent of the World Wide Web paved way for new modes of interaction amongst the connected individuals globally, and as I will later highlight, a global food community as well.

Web 1.0 in the mid 1990's provided a new means for content delivery and engagement. One of the hallmarks of Web 1.0 is that few of the web users acted as the content creators and a majority of the users acted as the content consumers.³² Despite the content creator to content consumer relationship, places on the Web such as blogs did provide a space for the discussions and user interactions to happen.³³ By connecting users to each other digitally, discourse in many communities flourished with unprecedented geographic spread and speed. This connection, again, stresses the social in social media. As Josh Braun said, "Framing social media as centers of reflexive distribution not only opens up sociologically interesting questions about how such distribution infrastructures are forged but also about how they affect the 'concatenation of texts through time' and the sense of shared attention and imagined community that enable public discourse."³⁴ In other words, the infrastructure of the Web mediates not only how information is collected and distributed, but also how communities and group-identity are created as a result of the sharing of information.

Many industries took advantage both economic and production changes as Web 1.0 becoming mainstream is well documented across media studies and therefore fueled by the consequential authority and distribution shifts.³⁵ However, the food industry is seldom discussed as a changing industry due to the mainstream adoption of Web 1.0. In this thesis, I demonstrate how the industry, and its related culture, have anticipated and adopted to the various developmental stages of Web 1.0, Web 2.0, and other networked devices.

³⁰ MIT Open Documentary Lab and IDFA DOCLAB. "MIT - Moments of Innovation (Location)," 2012. <https://momentsofinnovation.mit.edu/location>.

³¹ Kelsey Campbell-Dollaghan, "14 Amateur Photos Taken With the Very First Consumer Camera." Gizmodo. Accessed April 9, 2018. <https://gizmodo.com/14-amateur-photos-taken-with-the-very-first-consumer-ca-1424738060>.

³² Graham Cormode and Balachander Krishnamurthy, "Key Differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0," *First Monday* 13, no. 6 (April 25, 2008), <http://www.ojphi.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2125>.

³³ Jill Walker Rettberg, *Blogging*, 2 edition (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

³⁴ Josh Braun, "Social Media and Distribution Studies," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 1 (April 29, 2015): 2056305115580483, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115580483>.

³⁵ Michael Curtain, Jennifer Holt, and Sanson Kevin. *Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2014.

I will begin by recalling the history of food texts from the mid 20th century in the US as this was a time of increased consumerism and increased product choices.³⁶ For example, *Gourmet: The Magazine of Good Living* was the first American mass-circulated magazine to explicitly connect travel, food, and culture to each other in print. The mainstream usage of color photography for full-spreads in the early 1940's enabled consumers to see their food fantasies fulfilled.³⁷ Then the historical survey speeds up to the 1990's when food texts took another turn thanks to the affordances of connected digital media on the World Wide Web (Web 1.0). Here we see the first online food-related communities such as Epicurious and some of the first food bloggers, and then we hear about how restaurants were impacted by web infrastructure advances such as people leaving online reviews to other user's content.

Chapter 2 - Mainstream Diners Participate in Food Text Creation

From Web 1.0 in the mid 1990's to Web 2.0 in the early 2000's, media-related behaviors stayed the same while their form and function shifted. While in Web 1.0 people could generate their own texts, Web 2.0 enabled people to distribute these texts widely. Specifically, Web 2.0 was marked by a change of authority, authorship, and power enabled by digital technologies. O'Reilly provides a few examples of how Web 1.0 differed from Web 2.0 by way of platform and engagement, such as going from encyclopedia website Britannica Online (single creator and static) in Web 1.0 to Wikipedia (collaborative and dynamic) in Web 2.0.³⁸ So, while people could generate their own texts as before, Web 2.0 broke down barriers of production for content that could then be spread throughout the internet at unprecedented speeds. A constellation of events in the early and mid 2000's led to these shifts in online platforms and engagement.

³⁶ Lizabeth Cohen. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2003.

³⁷ Amy Touchette. "A Quick History of Color Photography (for Photographers)." *Photo & Video Envato Tuts+*, June 8, 2017. <https://photography.tutsplus.com/articles/the-reception-of-color-photography-a-brief-history-cms-28333>.

³⁸ Tim O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0?," in *Online Communication and Collaboration: A Reader*, ed. Helen Margaret Donelan, Karen Kear, and Magnus Ramage (Routledge, 2010).



Figure 4: Web 1.0 (Dotcom boom on the timeline) and Web 2.0 landscape. (Source: Pedro Menezes Pereira, "The Evolution of the Web 1.0 for the Web 2.0," Digital Discovery, accessed May 2, 2018, <http://digitaldiscovery.eu/en/a-evolucao-da-web-1-0-e-a-web-2-0/>)

Many digital platforms in Web 2.0 only existed because users were creating content to feed them. The infrastructures of the web and digitally connected devices were game changers of media production and consumption. In the late 2000's, camera phones became ubiquitous. A *Pew Research Center* survey in 2011 found that 92% of smart phone users use their phone to take photos, which is tied for the most common usage with text messaging (web browsing was at 84%).³⁹ What this points to is a perceived ease and naturalness associated with using smart phones to take photos and communicate. Therefore, these phones enable people to create their own visual content and then share photos or other information. Digital platforms that rely on user-generated content, then, have one less battle to fight in order to garner engagement.

That is to say, a key component of Web 2.0 is its stress on connecting people to each other in order to replicate community dynamics of discourse that either happen in real-life already, or enable those that may not be possible to have in real-life due to

³⁹ Michael Zhang, "The Importance of Cameras in the Smartphone War," PetaPixel, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://petapixel.com/2015/02/12/importance-cameras-smartphone-war/>.

geographic or other barriers.⁴⁰ Web 2.0 changes in platform infrastructure and interaction models empowered users to create and consume different forms of media while also engaging socially with other users. Graham Cormode and Balachander Krishnamurthy describe Web 2.0 as a “publish”/“subscribe” model where the web acts as a series of pathways to establish connection amongst users who either create or consume content through a social lens.⁴¹ What is interesting about this nomenclature of “publish”/“subscribe” is that it relates all interactions with actions of peer-to-peer actions with the intent of either sharing information with a wider audience or collecting information from specific social actors. These peer-to-peer networks of digital social media on the Web made food culture more public through online discourse, and also positioned newly digital food culture to take on increased social significance in its ability to act as a symbol for lifestyle values and identities.

I draw on a series of vignettes to illustrate how food culture has developed on digital social media platforms by talking to and reading the accounts of food text creators. Namely, I interview group of Instagram bloggers from Boston and an advertising creative who has become a major food influencer from the ground up. I also examine food text stylistic norms and cultures of practices. While showy photos of unicorn-inspired frozen drinks can “go viral,” these elaborate representations of food represent a more homogenous set of aesthetic preferences that act as an unofficial framework for food text creation. I pull into theories of identity formation and representation in order to illustrate how these food texts act as tools for broader communication of the self and social characteristics, instead of solely being about the food represented.

It becomes clear through this exploration that the proliferation of food texts on the internet have created new mental models for how users perceive and interact with restaurants, and more broadly food.

⁴⁰ Graham Cormode and Balachander Krishnamurthy, “Key Differences between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0,” *First Monday* 13, no. 6 (April 25, 2008), <http://www.ojphi.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2125>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3 – Fine Dining Chefs and Cultural Production via Digital Social Media

The creation of a digital space for interpersonal relationships and building communities is an affordance of Web 2.0 and beyond. Throughout these communities, information can be shared in real time and layered with multimedia dimensions (e.g. sound, text, video, still imagery). In that sense, the evolution of the Web has created new pathways for social and business networks to operate.⁴²

Social media usage has become ubiquitous within the fine dining industry. The food industry's organizational and motivational aspects have developed in response to new connective capabilities of digital platforms, especially with the social photo and video sharing platform Instagram. That is to say, what has emerged from the digitally connected social media ecosystem of food culture? At the center of the argument is an acknowledgement that the food industry, in particular the fine dining industry, considers symbolic capital as part of the industry's economy. With the importance of symbolic capital in mind, the audience of a food industry professional's social media content is not just prospective diners, but also other food industry professionals. Chefs in particular are beginning to view their own social media content engagement as a way to extend their creative/visionary voices as well as build a professional network of likeminded people. I observe these trends via digital ethnographic work on fine dining industry professionals and interviews with chefs and their staff in their respective restaurants.

The labor of a chef has morphed as social media usage has become expected from "top" chefs. When a new norm (social media usage) is introduced to a community of practice (the fine dining industry), the resulting role of an individual within that group (a chef who would like to have influence) also takes on new cultural requirements. Not all the members of the group agree on these changes, as I outline the arguments for and against the apparent weight of social media usage importance within the fine dining industry. What emerges is a narrative of the possibilities of storytelling and creative communication via social media, but also a keen awareness of the limitations of digital representations of food.

⁴² Linda S. L. Lai and Efraim Turban, "Groups Formation and Operations in the Web 2.0 Environment and Social Networks," *Group Decision and Negotiation* 17, no. 5 (September 1, 2008): 387–402, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10726-008-9113-2>.

Conclusion: The Tensions of Modern Food Texts and Their Culture

I find myself morphing—however awkwardly—into respectability just as things are getting really hot on the streets for any of my peers who are even semi-recognizable. The iniquitousness of Twitter and food and chef-related Web sites and blogs has totally changed the game for anyone with a television show—even me. You don't have to be very famous at all these days to end up with a blurry photograph on DumbAssCelebrities.com.⁴³

– Anthony Bourdain, *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook*.

The notion of a celebrity chef has shifted from being focused on who has a show on Food Network to who with Michelin stars has an active Instagram account. Having a personal social media account that shows off content from the cooking process (i.e. from cultivation of ingredients to finally eating a meal) has become an effective way to gain control of the narrative surrounding one's food creations within a social media ecosystem so flushed with users' (or diners', in this case) own content. With this tension in mind, social media usage from fine dining chefs and other food industry workers has become a professional necessity in order to display their culinary and creative knowledge to other industry peers as well as prospective diners.

I weave together actions and reactions from fine dining chefs regarding the pervasively visual food culture that has come to be enabled by cheap camera phones and the social media platforms on the Web. Through these stories, we see the convergences and divergences of perspectives on what this new-internet enabled food culture means to the fine dining professional as well as the larger fine dining community.

⁴³ Anthony Bourdain, *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook*. Reprint edition. New York: Ecco, 2011, 123-124.

Chapter 1 - How Popular Food Culture Got an Internet Boost: The World Wide Web Catches Eaters' Attention

The reality is, we as a nation of eaters have evolved. We've transitioned away from a world of food TV and celebrity chefs—where you had to be a card-carrying foodie to talk about food with any authority—to one where everyone has a stake in the game. Food has gone wide—it has become, of all things, cool.⁴⁴

-Adam Rapoport, Editor-in-Chief of *Bon Appétit*



⁴⁴ Adam Rapoport, "Editor's Letter." *Bon Appétit*, March 2016. 10.

What has changed about food culture? It has shifted into a convergence culture, enabled by digital media properties, where the role of producers and consumers has been changed into a situation more accurately reflected as a group of participants interacting with each other. Media scholar Henry Jenkins explains the convergence of media as representing, “a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content.”⁴⁵ Certainly, it is not the instructional messages of cookbooks that have shifted purpose as people still use recipes to cook, but what has shifted is instead the people who have been enabled to create, and engage with, the bulk of media concerning food available via the internet. What has also changed are expectations and breadth of community that cooks, diners, users, and others have acquired through the convergence of food related media in the digital age that open up opportunities to grow their mental representations of a global food culture.

Digital media have amplified the communicative elements of depictions of food through enabling spreadable images and videos of food. Food has been a rich vessel for socio-cultural meaning for millennia.⁴⁶ In particular, the narrative of food has been amplified to be about the socio-cultural context and consequences of that food. These narratives, that of a recipe or exploration of a certain ingredient or dish, allow users to become intimately aware with a food in multiple ways (the colors, the source, the history and/or context, the texture, the sounds, etc.) sans physically encountering and consuming the food. With this said, users now have access to a globalized network of food related images and narratives which enables an enriched understanding of food culture than would be possible from an in-print cookbook or radio recipe. *While the underlying purpose of the construction and consumption of food texts remain the same, the authority of food culture and its resulting narrative control has shifted as a result of the convergence of food texts.*

Furthermore, as literacy in visual food culture increases amongst the general public, chefs and restaurants are met with a new challenge, which will be explored in greater depth in Chapter 3. How does one surprise and impress the diner who has already witnessed a representation of the dish through their phone or a streaming video?

⁴⁵ Henry Jenkins. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, 3. Revised edition. New York, NY: NYU Press, 2008.

⁴⁶ Casey Man Kong Lum, and Marc de Ferrière le Vayer, eds. *Urban Foodways and Communication: Ethnographic Studies in Intangible Cultural Food Heritages Around the World*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016.

This challenge emerges as the most pressing questions for the fine dining industry as they face the reality of social media and the visual food culture that has emerged. However, the fine dining industry has confronted how technology would change their business model, both in terms of service (front of house) and management (back of house). Even more, the history of growing media coverage of the dining industry and its assemblages brought on new anxieties about what it meant to be a chef. Would a chef need to only cook good food in order to be popular in a world where they could be on TV, or would they need to be charismatic as well? Questions such as that have infiltrated the fine dining industry as it grapples with changing socio-cultural tastes, media and technology innovations, and the underlying values of fine dining as an institution.

In this chapter, I document the changing forms of and authority of and perspectives expressed in food related texts and technologies. In particular, I trace the convergence of food texts and digital technologies in order to show how they have together enriched visual food culture and its changing authorities.

Again, thinking back to what Rapoport said about the nation of eaters becoming “cool[er]...” How did the United States nation of eaters evolve to view food culture as “cool?” [Put own survey data here on the number of people who have seen photos/videos of food on their social media news feeds].

Food Industry Companies Harness the Power of Narrative to Sell Products

There is a long history of food being a vessel for narratives on socio-cultural value and personal identification. Narratives using food take many different forms, and I could have written a dozen different versions of this thesis to reflect that fact. Even though I focus on food texts as vessels for narrative in the digital age, it is beneficial to understand how some these narratives were constructed pre-World Wide Web. By looking back at food culture in the Mid 20th Century, we can better understand how exactly how agents of markets, politics, and social groups embedded socio-cultural messages onto food in order to achieve a certain outcome.

The 20th century was a period of consumer-perspective shifting as food preparation and consumption became glamorized and from expanded to be more social. While Cold War R&D led to the creation of the many new consumer technologies, the exploration of the role of technologies in the specific space of the kitchen is especially

loaded as the kitchen represents many dimensions of historical, social, and political importance. Gabrielle Hecht coined the term 'technopolitics' to describe the phenomena of how big-picture politics can put in motion the research and development of artifacts.⁴⁷ American kitchens were the stages for cross-cultural comparisons as they were being touted as the epitome of United States supremacy during the Cold War in mid 20th century. For example, both U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev used the embodiment of the kitchen to connect their countries' political ideals of the family, the state, and the market during the 1959 Kitchen Debate.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann argued that a modern kitchen "embodies the ideology of the culture to which it belongs to' as a kitchen in the 20th century was filled with and connected 'electrical grids, gas networks, water systems, the food chain...[and the] floor plans connect the kitchens to housing, streets, cities, and infrastructures via an intricate web of large technical systems." These pieces of the greater system have been assembled and maintained by a variety of social actors who need to function within that culture.⁴⁹ That is, kitchens & food are symbolic—it impossible to simplify them as just tools used to survive. The food and technology intersection that many consumers in the United States choose to engage with is a part of conspicuous consumption and thinking about how they present themselves to society.

Marketers took the reins of the narrative control surrounding food during the Postwar years in order to encourage consumers to embrace new technologies related to food. In particular, the idealized model kitchens of the future were depicted being a space enriched with possibility for identity formation of all who participated in the conspicuous consumption of food and kitchen technologies. Before the mid 20th century, household appliances and furnishings were considered an unexciting necessity by retailers and customers, but not necessarily a glamorous product to be promoted or fawned over. For example, a New York Times retail article from 1881 only featured one page of retail advertising with no mention of household wares. However, household goods were made glamorous when, beginning in the mid 20th century, the number of items in domestic appliances and wares skyrocketed and the technology advanced at an

⁴⁷ Carroll Pursell, *Technology in Postwar America: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 3.

⁴⁹ Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, eds. *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2011. 2.

unprecedented speed.⁵⁰ A new ideology of the power of housewares came with the notable focus on bringing new technologies into the home through an expansion of consumer offerings.

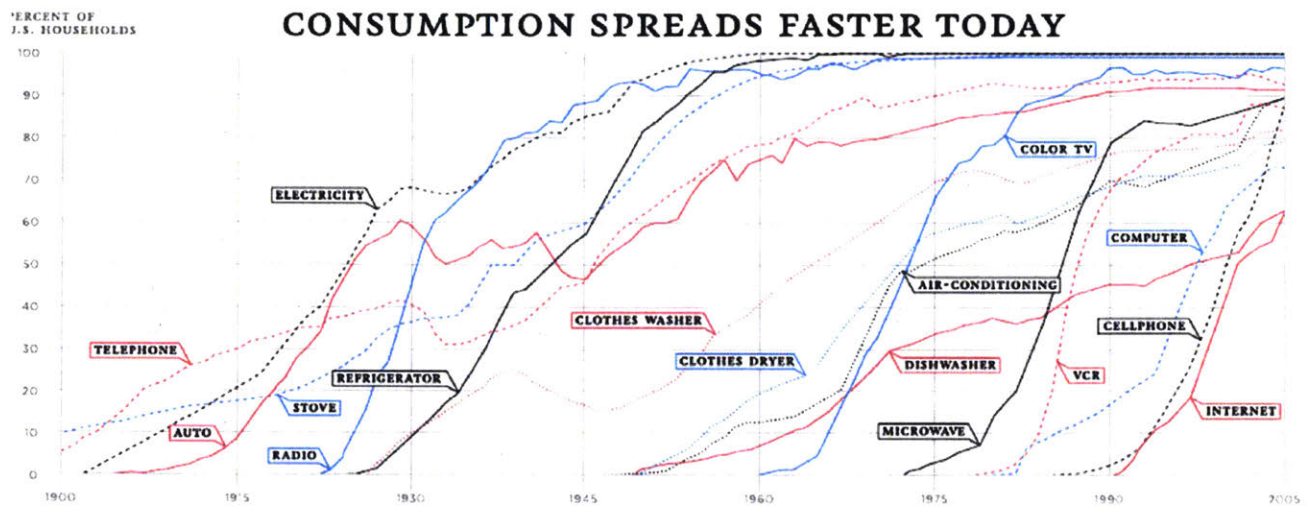


Figure 5: A graph of the spread of technology in the 20th century, from 1900 to 2005 based on percentage of U.S. households who had adopted that technology. (Source: Derek Thompson, "The 100-Year March of Technology in 1 Graph," *The Atlantic*, April 7, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/04/the-100-year-march-of-technology-in-1-graph/255573/>.)

In fact, the American National Exhibit in Moscow in 1959 displayed the 'Miracle Kitchen' and touted; 'Household chores in the future will be gone for the American housewife at the touch of a button or the wave of a hand.'⁵¹ This ideology created a sense of urgency and opportunity through a set of future promises aimed at the main stakeholders of the domestic sphere. Consumers were often told that new appliances would bestow almost magical qualities for their everyday tasks, and the ease of the new products operations and successful outcomes were stressed. These connections built layers of symbolic importance onto the increasing food culture discourse.

Similarly, the same promises of new domestic appliances were also promoted through new high-tech foods. Although many convenience foods were marketed as ways for women to save time in the kitchen, few women complained about the time it took

⁵⁰ Earl Lifshey. *The Housewares Story; a History of the American Housewares Industry*. National Housewares Manufacturers Assoc., 1973. 12-3.

⁵¹ "Home Is Where the Future Is." *The Economist*, September 16, 2004. <http://www.economist.com/node/3171381>.

them to cook. In a 1958 study, it was found that when women did not have a lot of time to prepare meals, only 11% of the time did they use convenience foods while the majority said that they opted to cook meals ahead of time.⁵² As a result, the insight that housewives enjoyed the act of cooking greatly impacted how housewares manufacturers approached selling kitchen innovations. If women enjoyed cooking, products that would decrease the time and labor necessary to cook a homemade meal without diminishing the from-scratch integrity of their meals proved to be the best angle to get housewives to want the new kitchen products. While a housewife would be hesitant to give up making a birthday cake from scratch, she certainly would not be opposed to having it take less time to cook in the oven or having less clean up time. By freeing up time from the laborious or monotonous kitchen tasks, housewives would theoretically have more time for creating quality meals for their family, doing other household tasks, or perhaps even some free time for the woman herself, all without neglecting her domestic responsibilities. These new domestic technologies claimed to do the impossible; they sold the idea that a domestic-bound life did not have to be as hard as it once was.

The adoption of new kitchen technologies did not happen naturally despite the carefully crafted marketing slogans and messages pointed towards housewives. Advertising and marketing professionals had to study their target audience and then carefully concoct the marketing of new products to housewives in order to assert new products into the lives of everyday Americans. One example of the marketing challenge of a new product into the culinary canon of everyday Americans was the introduction of the flavoring monosodium glutamate (MSG). Though MSG was a flavor additive and not a household appliance, its identity as a new Cold War domestic technology makes it a relatable case study for exploring the dynamics of the adoption of domestic technologies. The creators had to develop a market for this new seasoning where one did not exist before. This was a common problem for integrating newly developed technologies into the behaviors of the general public because many new technologies were tasked with either creating a need or fixing a problem that did not exist previously. Returning to the marketing of MSG, George B. Hamilton, the general manager of the amino products division of International Mineral & Chemical Corporation, described the

⁵² Laura Shapiro, *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950's America*. New York, N.Y.: Viking, 2004. 46-7.

process of introducing and convincing housewives to begin cooking with MSG in a 1954 article, 'It is impossible to talk with all housewives... [so] we have been telling our story to the American housewife through people she considers food authorities.'⁵³ Hamilton then proceeds to detail the steps necessary to make sure all of the trusted food influencers of housewives are educated of the 'benefits' of the then new MSG flavoring. The corporation made a place for MSG in American kitchens through speaking with food editors of magazines, television programs, radio and newspapers, having representatives attend food trade shows, making contact with individuals at the high school, college, and home economics levels, and getting MSG into cookbooks and movies... but no chefs.⁵⁴ The creation of a market for MSG demonstrated how companies worked with trusted authorities to get domestic stakeholders to gain the acceptance of their targeted demographics.

Moreover, many other new technologies in the mid-20th century passed down delicately constructed doctrines about how a consumer should approach or use these new inventions from the marketing departments of private companies, through the public facing authorities, and ultimately, to the decision maker for the family. As women, primarily housewives, were the decision makers for their families' domestic affairs, the responsibility of screening what was safe to enter their homes fell onto their shoulders. Nonetheless, there was bound to be a breakdown between the fanciful promises and the lackluster realities of these products' features with everyone from media, the stores they were shopping in, and their trusted authority figures telling these housewives a barrage of different messages about new products and all the great things these items could accomplish for them. The occasional breakdown in communication through this nuanced chain of communication caused consumers to have fears and misunderstandings about the products they were being sold, and rightly so. However, with the exception of a few consumer boycotts and women-led policy changes, concerns about the relationships between food and identity tended to stay siloed.

Postwar Western culture was a turning point of consumer perspectives and developments in food related products and their significance. Overall, it is the moment in which these cultures experienced an influx in variety in grocery stores and appliances

⁵³ George B. Hamilton, "Introducing a New Item to the American Kitchen." *The Analysts Journal* 10, no. 3 (June 1, 1954): 103-4.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

available for the home. Later on, in the 1980's, it was seen as being a turning point for American food culture yet again, as fusion food and retailed "gourmet" food was being added to grocery store shelves and suburban chain menus. For example, it was seen as a bold move when Wolfgang Puck introduced frozen gourmet pizza to grocery stores that were topped with "exotic" ingredients like goat cheese and wild mushrooms.⁵⁵ That is to say, with the increasing variety of choice of different food related items, cooking and eating food became glamorized and made more complex across socio-economic classes.

The Rise of Socio-Political Narrative Meets Color Film & Recipes

Fantastical images of decadent food have been circulating since the 20th century. Stunt foods like colorful unicorn desserts and other frequent objects of food porn, an informal term for "close-up images of juicy, delicious food in advertisements," are not simply a consequence of digitally-enabled visual culture and subsequent obsession.⁵⁶ Indeed, the circulation of glamorous food images is not a new thing, but what is new is the way they are spreading. It is not a coincidence that the primary change makers of food texts in the mid- to late- 20th century were food industry companies that were looking to promote their new foods and appliances. The adoption of color photography by professionals invigorated the role visual food representations could take in media such as advertising, cookbooks, and magazines. That is to say, the first images of "food porn" were the color photographs of elaborate food displays that were printed throughout mass-produced media. Nickolas Muray's color photography for McCall's was regarded as cutting edge at in the mid 20th century due to his mastery of three color carbro process. With this tri-color printing process, his images boldly emerged as "appetizing" representations of food.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Patrick McDonnell. "R&D: On the Served Curve." *Food Arts*, April 1999.

⁵⁶ "Urban Dictionary: Food Porn." Urban Dictionary. Accessed April 30, 2018. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=food%20porn>.

⁵⁷ Shannon Thomas Perich. "Color Sells: Nickolas Muray's Food Photography." NPR.org. Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2010/04/22/126189139/nickolas-muray>.



Figure 6: Nickolas Muray color carbonyl photograph of a food spread ca. 1944, used in #4 McCall's Magazine 1944 (Source: Nickolas Muray/Courtesy of the National Museum of American History Photographic History Collection)

Also dazzling homemakers at the time were the printed books from Betty Crocker later in 1950. Betty Crocker may be one of the best fictional characters ever created in the United States. She was invented in 1921 by The Washburn Crosby Company, a predecessor of General Mills Inc., in order to put a personal touch on the responses to baking questions that were received by the company. The Company felt that in order to meet an increasing consumer demand for its products and contextual knowledge, such as home economics issues, Betty Crocker could become a relatable figure for homemakers to "befriend." In a survey of American homemakers in 1945, Betty Crocker was the second most recognized woman after First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. In response to this popularity and trust consumers had with the fictional homemaker, The U.S. Office of War Information worked with the Betty Crocker brand to produce media on wartime home economics best practices, such as a radio show on "Our Nation's Rations" and a booklet on wartime cooking.⁵⁸ This techno political move boosted the power of a food brand to emerge as a beacon of admiration and guidance. The admiration and guidance that consumers sought from Betty Crocker (as a brand) led to

⁵⁸ "The Story of Betty Crocker." BettyCrocker.com. Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://www.bettycrocker.com/menus-holidays-parties/mhplibrary/parties-and-get-togethers/vintage-betty/the-story-of-betty-crocker>.

the success of the Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook in 1950.⁵⁹ The cookbook, most famously, had full-spread full-color photographs of food accompanied by their recipes and guidance for bringing the creations to life.



Figure 7: Pages from Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook, 1954, (Source: "Feast for the Eyes").

Despite photography professionals enchanting the public with color photography from the mid 20th century, it was not until later in the 20th century that color photography would go mainstream. Therefore, these colorful images circulated in magazines as fantastical depictions of what the real, life-like versions of recipes could look like. Kodak's Kodachrome and other film brands had established colored film as an option in the market in the 1960's. Then, by 1970, the price of color film went down enough to make colored film accessible to the general public. It was then in 1980 that color film became the standard choice, reigning over black and white film, for the general public.⁶⁰

By looking at these 20th century developments, The trend of "food porn" on digital social media platforms in the early 20th century is grounded in the food text practices of the these 20th century developments. However, a major trend that shifts around food text

⁵⁹ Paula Forbes, "Betty Crocker and the Lost Art of Home Economics." Epicurious, January 27, 2016. <https://www.epicurious.com/expert-advice/betty-crocker-picture-cookbook-review-article>.
⁶⁰ Michael Archambault. "A Brief History of Color Photography, From Dream to Reality." PetaPixel, October 11, 2015. <https://petapixel.com/2015/10/11/a-brief-history-of-color-photography-from-dream-to-reality/>.

creation is the changing hands of the main producers of food texts. While in the 20th century it was the photography experts who controlled the imagery of mass-circulated food texts, the beginning of the 21st century points to social media users as the new guardians of food text creation.

The Appeal of Crowdsourced Restaurant Intelligence

So, as the number of fantastical food images increased thanks to the invention and adoption of color photography, the Web (and subsequently, mobile technology) enabled these images to proliferate quickly across the globe. Specifically, Web 2.0 affords users the ability to create content to feed digital platforms *while also* viewing and engaging with the other users' content.

The digitization of food culture practices, discourse, community via the Web created new opportunities for the food and tech industries to impact interactions around food. In this section, I explore how food culture experiences are "valued" from a business perspective by the intersection of tech and food texts industries.

There can be value in an idea, even a brand, but to many tech companies in the early 21st century, it is the culmination of data that matters most. In March 2018, Google sold-off Zagat after its 2011 acquisition of the crowd-sourced restaurant review brand. I stress *brand* in this sense—Zagat, which started in the 1980s, always viewed itself as a crowdsourced restaurant intelligence source first and a website/guide second. However, it became clear after Zagat's acquisition by Google in 2011 that Google was simply after the crowdsourced data Zagat had and not the food brand itself. After all, Google was trying to compete with the other crowdsourced restaurant review site Yelp. Once Google changed their business strategy and headed for real-time updates on restaurant business based on time of day and users' ease of submitting their own reviews directly to Google, and therefore Zagat's data lost relevance.⁶¹

What is unique about Zagat is their methodology for collecting various "amateur" opinions before the internet became a commonplace for discussion. Zagat started in the 1980s when the husband and wife lawyer duo (Nina and Tim Zagat) wanted to start a hobby of enriching their restaurant insights with those of their friends in the New York City area. Their friends all agreed that the newspaper reviews did not seem reliable, so

⁶¹ Monica Burton, "What Is Zagat and How Do Zagat Reviews Work?" Eater, March 5, 2018. <https://www.eater.com/2018/3/5/17080772/zagat-guide-reviews-google-infatuation-sale>.

they expanded their own amateur ranking system.⁶² The couple utilized chain mail and their own analysis in order to incorporate over 200 reviewers into their self-printed guides and then the guide was then professionally sold via printed books. But when the world opened up to the internet, they remained behind a paywall on the internet and seemingly lost relevance to the openly accessible Yelp.⁶³

However, Yelp was not the first website to come onto the scene and act as a lens onto the restaurant experience. The food industry, specifically the dining sector, grappled with how to anticipate and accommodate the role of technology within their field. Restaurateurs saw technology as a force that would cause disruption to their status quo.

Of course, it's difficult to rival the technology that the new three-star restaurants can provide. George [Jetson] loves the bubble rooms... Sitting in glass aquariums suspended over the kitchen, you watch the chef work below you. When each course arrives, the glass darkens and the four walls become a liquid-crystal diorama—a visual accompaniment to the chef's creation. The room is perfumed successfully with elements from the dish itself, other scents, or sounds and images that provide contrasting nuances to the experience of the food itself.⁶⁴

In Mark Stech-Novak's vision of the restaurant of the future in the then future millennium, new technology not only connects the diner with the chef more transparently, but also creates a layered sensorial symphony of experience as the diner consumes the food. Stech-Novak, an ex-chef turned kitchen designer, used his 1999 *Food Arts* magazine piece to speculate how our dining experience would be forever changed by the adoption of cutting-edge technology in the restaurant industry, his statements are not so radical when compared to the behaviors and hopes of the industry at this time for creating more enriched experiences for diners.

Food Arts magazine, started in 1988, was the first food industry magazine of its type to explore evolving trends and insider perspectives of the food business by the industry and for the industry. This magazine was perceived as accurately reading the pulse of the industry in an engaging way. In an editorial column of the magazine in 1989,

⁶² "About Us - Our History." Zagat. Accessed March 6, 2018. <https://www.zagat.com/about-us/our-history>.

⁶³ Monica Burton, "What Is Zagat and How Do Zagat Reviews Work?" *Eater*, March 5, 2018. <https://www.eater.com/2018/3/5/17080772/zagat-guide-reviews-google-infatuation-sale>.

⁶⁴ Mark Stech-Novak, "Stech Trek." *Food Arts*, September 1999. 86.

Wolfgang Puck said, "Anyone in the quality food industry should be happy to have [this magazine]. There is no other trade magazine geared to the quality market... it is fantastic."⁶⁵ With this and other marks of legitimization within the industry, the magazine went on to open up a dialogue about a spectrum of issues that faced the industry. Everything from table setting trends to changing financial strains was discussed. In the midst of these food and consumer centric discussions sometimes emerged chatter about how new technologies would impact the industry. While it is true that, as a 1989 "Geared for the Future" piece asserted, "Food serving styles change from year to year.... A chef's method and technique are constant," the industry never ceased to discuss how the method and techniques of running successful restaurants were constantly evolving due to a variety of new developments from outside of the industry.⁶⁶

I explored archival issues of *Food Arts* (1988 to 2000) in order to map how the restaurant industry was adopting and anticipating new technologies, as well as how they interpreted their business demands as changing as a result. These years of magazines confronted issues of connected technologies on the dining portion of the restaurant industry. Specifically, three main streams of innovation emerged from the pieces and comments throughout the magazine. First, technology was seen as thoroughly improving how restaurants handled the administrative and service elements of operating a physical restaurant space. Second, new media channels opened up for restaurants to see and be seen within a then consumer-centered publicity landscape that was the internet (i.e. changing their marketing strategies). Third, this new digital realm increased interactions between food industry professionals, such as chefs and restaurant critics, with not only diners but also their own employees... for better and for worse. These advances in technologies were readily adapted by the food industry, but the discourse around the technologies remained novel with a thread of novice perplexity. I am specifically interested in the third stream, how Web 1.0 increased interactions between food industry professionals and their critics and/or their diners.

The Web broke down barriers for chefs, restaurant industry professionals, diners, and critics to all meet on the internet to discuss various aspects of food culture like never before. For example, the "Site-Seeing" piece in a 1999 issue of *Food Arts* opens up tongue-in-cheek to try to explain how "online" has become a space for people across the

⁶⁵ "It Was Lonely at the Top for Our Readers." *Food Arts*, June 1989.

⁶⁶ "Geared for the Future." *Food Arts*, October 1989. 76.

restaurant industry to discuss many topics, in particular, their complaints about work. “Whole lotta gripin’ goin’ on... After a long evening of work, you get home from the restaurant around midnight. You’re tired, you’re sweaty, and you’re gnarly as hell. The last thing you want to think about or talk about is work, right? Wrong.”⁶⁷ But restaurant staff felt like they needed somewhere to communicate with each other about frustrations of bosses and annoying diners, inside of the walk-in freezers or outside in smoke-break alleyways. Waiters began to create a small handful of websites, such as Waitressing Gripe Page and Can I Take Your Order? Not!, for not only staff to talk, but also for diners to chime in on the conversation about poor service or other peculiar restaurant-staff experiences.⁶⁸ What is interesting about these online spaces for diners and restaurant workers and to discuss shared experiences is that this may very well be one of the first times that discourse between the two groups happened in a “neutral” territory such as the Net. For example, a diner could complain about a server from hell to friends or even the management, but in these online forums, communities blossomed over sharing stories of one-off restaurant experiences that had little to do with the food being served but instead the service and environment. In this way, discourse about restaurant experiences had made their way onto the web and set a precedent for people of all backgrounds, not just critics, to take part in the conversation about what it means to work and/or dine in a restaurant.

In addition to restaurant experiences being discussed online, a more vocal clientele extended the food industry’s participation to practice “responsive journalism” amongst food critics and recipe postings. A logistical problem of the restaurant review and guide business seemed to be resolved via the internet and its dynamic content nature— Peter Meltzer, a food critic, said that he no longer had to mourn a fresh printing of a guide book that contained now shuttered restaurants as websites allowed him to simply delete reviews for restaurants there were no longer open.⁶⁹ But these logistical problems and solutions were not the main interest of food industry professionals on the internet—they were more interested in the interactivity that developed with the content (such as recipes) that they published on the web. For example, Christian Albin, the executive chef at The Four Seasons had posted a recipe for crab cakes online. The comments were not all positive, as many of them called the recipe too involved or

⁶⁷ Julie Mautner. “Site-Seeing.” *Food Arts*, September 1999.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Peter Meltzer. “Site-Seeing.” *Food Arts*, September 1999.

confusing. But the affordances of an interactive website allowed Albin to respond and try to correct the recipe, give advice, and interact with the commenters.⁷⁰

So, while chefs used to print their recipes in magazines or cookbooks as an initiation of communication, and perhaps a letter to the editor would result, now communication amongst chefs, diners, and home cooks were able to be much more reflexive and therefore mirror a discourse versus a signal. This widening of discourse can be seen as the beginning of “regular” diners and cooks being empowered to more fully engage with food culture via the web.

A Recipe for Community: Changing Forms of Cookbooks & Surrounding Culture

The restaurant industry was not the only food culture community to experience a change in interactivity amongst their cohort due in part to the internet. Home cooks, as well as magazines and other media that supported home cooking communities, also saw an increased access to each other at new speeds enabled by the internet.

A major cultural revolution peaked in the mid 20th century for home cooks and more mainstream U.S. diners. This revolution is a key moment for food culture as it signified an attitudinal shift that would prime the food culture community for increased interactivity on a global scale. *Gourmet: The Magazine of Good Living* had the agenda of expanding cultural horizons through culinary exploration since its first printing in 1941. In the mid 20th century, the mass importation of European foods and flavors and increasing ease of transatlantic travel positioned food as a dynamic part of social and cultural explorations. In particular, *Gourmet* was pointed to as an indicator of how Americans dropped Puritanical mentalities around food in favor of, “an opportunity exercises the taste buds with a variety of interesting flavors and to enjoy the experience in the company of family and friends.”⁷¹

There was, and still is, a reflexive relationship between the recipe execution in a domestic space and the socio-cultural connections that emerge from dining out and

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ David Strauss, “Beating Nazis with Truffles and Tripe, The Early Years of *Gourmet: The Magazine of Good Living*.” *Setting the Table for Julia Child: Gourmet Dining in America, 1934–1961*, 1 edition., 134–62. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011

travel. However, these connections have existed within food culture at different proximities to one another. In particular, the rise of food and lifestyle magazines in the mid 20th century paralleled a growing consumer interest in exploring new social and cultural avenues from the comfort of the home. More recently, in the tail-end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, digital avenues allowed for these cross cultural and community connections to flourish with ease and at increasing speeds. While the experience of cooking for oneself in one's home was once private, digital media expanded the public purview of home cooking in an unlikely and profound way. Cooking at home became not only a cultural experience, but also a social experience.

The formula is simple: when you cook for people, they feel cared for. That hasn't changed. What's different is that forty years ago my interest in food felt like a very solitary passion. Today everybody's interested, and cooks connect in ways we didn't dream of before computers came into our lives. Now, thanks to Twitter I have friends I've never met all around the world. These friendships may be virtual, but to me they are real; I'm no longer alone when I cook.⁷²

- Ruth Reichl, Editor-in-Chief of *Gourmet Magazine*

Ruth Reichl was the final Editor-in-Chief of *Gourmet Magazine* before it folded in 2009. In an 'obituary' for the magazine in *The New York Times*, fellow influential food-related media maven Christopher Kimball, formerly of *Cook's Illustrated* and *America's Test Kitchen*, bemoaned a different sentiment towards the possibilities of food culture and community that have emerged from the digitization of the food world.

The shuttering of *Gourmet* reminds us that in a click-or-die advertising marketplace, one ruled by a million instant pundits, where an anonymous Twitter comment might be seen to pack more resonance and useful content than an article that reflects a lifetime of experience, experts are not created from the top down but from the bottom up. They can no longer be coroneted; their voices have to be deemed essential to the lives of their customers. That leaves, I think, little room for the thoughtful, considered editorial with which *Gourmet* delighted its readers for almost seven decades.

Kimball's sentiment is one of disappointment and dismay—the democratization of discourse around food culture means the lack of recognition of expertise within the

⁷² Ruth Reichl, *My Kitchen Year: 136 Recipes That Saved My Life*. New York: Random House, 2015. xvii.

discussion. Kimball's fears of authority in food culture are valid, but when compared to Reichl's excitement of a growing conversation and embrace of community, Kimball seems to negate technological progress with fears of authoritative digression.

But 14 years before the collapse of *Gourmet Magazine's* print volumes, Conde Nast launched the digital-consumer brand Epicurious in 1994 to cover topics relating to cooking, wine, travel, recipes and restaurants. The mission of this new brand adventure was to embrace the possibilities of Web 1.0 in order to invent a new level of food culture discourse. To illustrate how magazines were approaching the digital divide at this time, there was only one computer for *Allure* magazine's team the same year as Epicurious was founded. With this in mind, launching an online-only media brand in 1995 seemed like a shot in the dark.

The idea for Epicurious came from a Thanksgiving dinner I was cooking. This was 1994. I was making two turkeys — I had one in the oven and one in the grill because I had so many people coming. I was afraid the other turkey would never get done. AOL had something called the "Talk Turkey Hotline." I went on at about six in the morning. I posted the question, "It's 21 degrees in my backyard. I have to put a turkey into the grill. What do I need to know?" It was unbelievable. I got almost a dozen responses instantly. I realized, "Oh my God, we are really onto something here." It also happened to have been one of the best turkeys I ever made in my life.

– Rochelle Udell, Founder of Epicurious⁷³

And more than Udell's turkey turned out well. Epicurious is still flourishing on the internet. On the Epicurious website, they proudly declared, "we were the first recipe website, or close enough. One minute, there were no recipes online. And then there were. Suddenly, anyone who could figure out how to connect to the Internet could have access to thousands of the best recipes and food writing the world had to offer."⁷⁴ At first, the vision for Epicurious was "blog-like" before blogs existed, so it was similar to a food tabloid.

⁷³ Eric Gillin, "The Oral History of the Launch of Epicurious," Epicurious, August 18, 2015, <https://www.epicurious.com/about/epicurious-oral-history-article>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

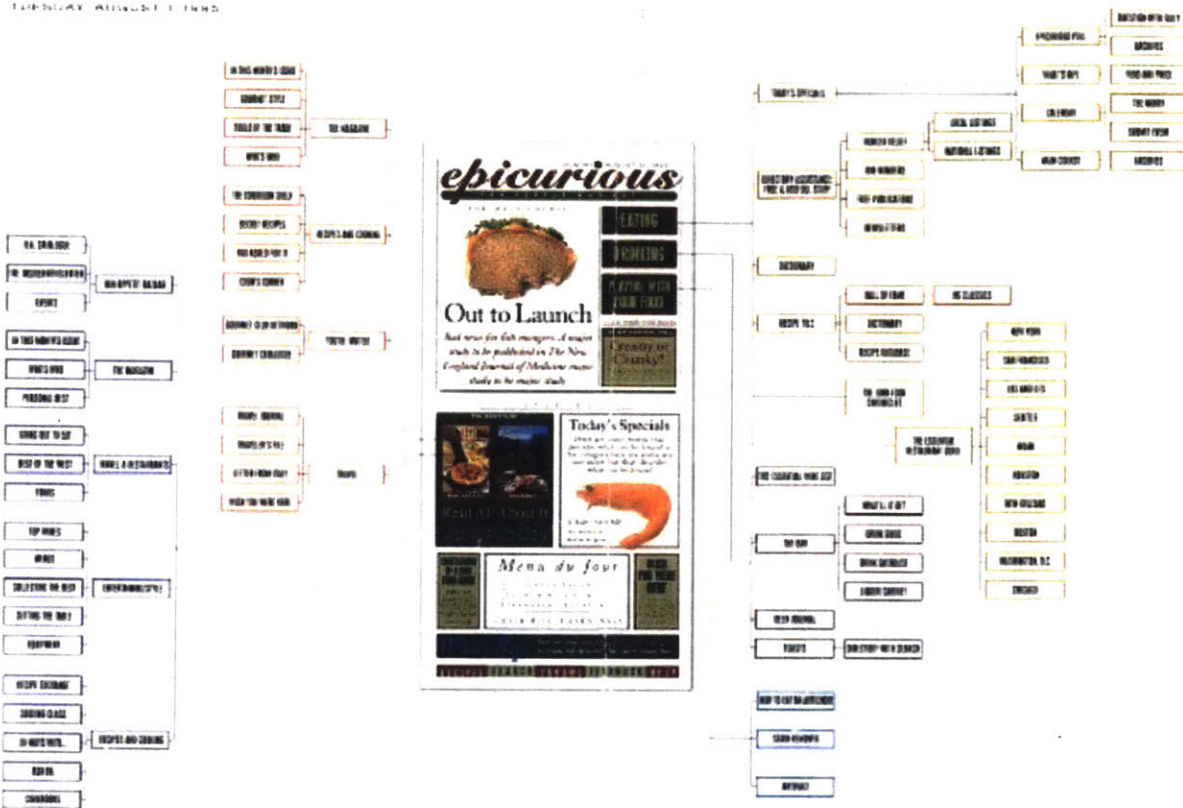


Figure 8: "The original Epicurious sitemap from 1995, all of which was hand-coded in HTML and linked together manually. Note the dummy copy at the center, emblematic of the house editorial style at the time." (Source: Epicurious)

One of the major challenges that emerged was not the content itself, but digitizing in-print recipes into an online and searchable format. In 1995, the team paid Conde Nast \$1 a year to access to all of their recipes, as Epicurious did not have any of its own content yet. At the time, scanners were not able to read the special characters and fractions used in recipes, so the team had to find another solution. Thus, the team would send packets of hundreds of photocopied recipes cut out of Conde Nast magazines to a group of cyber monks in Virginia, via The Electronic Scriptorium.⁷⁵ By 1998, Epicurious had an online recipe database of 7,600 different recipes.⁷⁶ By 2005, Epicurious had compiled 20,000 recipes and began to expanded content to YouTube by

⁷⁵ Ibid.
⁷⁶ Chuck Ross. "Conde Nast, Discovery Channel Eye New Show: 'Epicurious' on Cable Would Tap Material From Food, Travel Titles." Ad Age. March 17, 1997. Accessed October 06, 2017. <http://adage.com/article/news/conde-nast-discovery-channel-eye-show-epicurios-cable-tap-material-food-travel-titles/73831/#>.

producing a series of two-minute tutorial videos.⁷⁷ The Epicurious brand was not limited to the web, it also had a partnership with the Discovery Channel for a 26-episode show of the same title, in addition to an e-commerce partnership with William Sonoma to advertise and sell cookware on the Epicurious website.⁷⁸

But the core of Epicurious' strategy was its social community that emerged out of its message boards and online "recipe swaps." Users posted requests for common and obscure recipes, commented on each other's content, and formed a variety of subgroups around characteristics like regional locations. Some users even went as far as bringing these communities offline for dinners, and some users even found their spouses through the site. Pointing out how powerful the Epicurious community became, Jeff Jarvis said, "They took over. They held us hostage. One time, the technology wasn't working well, and they threatened to leave us for Alaska Airlines' chat room until we fixed things up."⁷⁹

Food texts have a precedent of being social media—that is, throughout the history of food texts, they have served both social and practical purposes. As John House, senior editor of Epicurious at its launch, explained, "Food is in the sweet spot between practical service journalism and enormous potential for social activity."⁸⁰ Discussions about food preparation and consumption were not just limited to the forums of "professional" publishers. Indeed, there was a movement of home cooks and food writing amateurs who used the space of the internet to share recipes as well as life stories, therefore building communities formed around a deep connection to food and its culture. However, *while the internet inspired a surge of blog posts and discussions about food and social narratives, community cookbooks had similarly captivated home cooks to create dialogue about food production and consumption.* As early as 1837, Jane Janvier's female community recipe collection was composed of recipes written by a group of women. The recipes were visibly edited in real time, made better, and annotated by hand over time. Thus, women used food-related activities like collaborating on the cookbook as opportunities to socialize with each other.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Eric Gillin, "The Oral History of the Launch of Epicurious," Epicurious, August 18, 2015, <https://www.epicurious.com/about/epicurious-oral-history-article>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Janet Theophano, *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

The food blog, therefore, is a modern incarnation of community cookbooks and the social ties that form around them. There are key elements that make a good blog and set it apart from a more formalized medium like a traditional printed cookbook. David Lebovitz, another one of the first food bloggers on the web with his blog created in 2004, specifically calls on cookbook authors to use their food blogs as a space for conversation and personality. “A food blog isn’t just a collection of recipes,” he says, “It’s a story, and your blog is your story. People can get a cheesecake recipe anywhere. But it’s your cheesecake that they want, and they want to find out why you like it, and want to hear what you have to say about it.”⁸² With this in mind, many saw digital food communities as a place to blur the lines between the utilitarian usage of food and the socio-cultural milieu that surrounded it.

In 2005, Luisa Weiss was working in book publishing in New York City and toying around with the idea of starting a food blog to, as she explains on her website, *The Wednesday Chef*, “work through a mountain of recipe clippings from the *New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* that I’d been obsessively saving for years.”⁸³ Although she was concerned that she’d be late to the game since, “there were already twenty other food blogs online,” she forged ahead anyway to become one of the Internet’s first food bloggers. Now, twelve years after launching *The Wednesday Chef*, with thousands of food blogs in the digital media ecosystem and two cookbooks under her belt, Weiss speaks about the communities that emerged in those early days of food blogging as well as how the industry has shifted in the past decade.

When I started, there were some unspoken rules I think still apply. Early on, people would come to blogs to be part of the community, leave thoughtful comments, make friends and that’s how you would build readership. Link back, don’t steal recipes without attribution—those rules still apply but because people now read on their phones, people don’t comment as much. I think that’s why Instagram has enormous success [in 2016] because you can like a post and you can also comment but you’ll notice that there’s always so many more likes than comments. Because blogs don’t give you that option, you’ll notice that my posts from 5 years ago got far more comments than they do

⁸² David Lebovitz, “5 Do’s and 5 Don’ts About Food Blogging for Cookbook Authors,” Food Blog Alliance (blog), October 18, 2009, <https://foodblogalliance.com/2009/10/18/5-dos-and-5-donts-about-food-blogging-for-cookbook-authors/>.

⁸³ Luisa Weiss, “About,” *The Wednesday Chef* (blog), 2014, http://www.thewednesdaychef.com/the_wednesday_chef/about-me.html/.

now, even though my readership has not necessarily dropped off.⁸⁴

Despite the larger digital media ecosystem of recipes built on the internet, printed cookbooks have not faded from culture but have even become hybrid thanks to digital systems.

Epicurious launched Tastebook, an online tool allowing users to create their own customizable hardbound cookbooks using

Epicurious' online recipe database, in 2007. When launched, the concept of a custom cookbook compiled through a user's

curation of recipes was described as being similar to the experience of making playlists on iTunes. The company co-founder Kamran Mohsenin described, "If you know how to use iTunes, you know how to use TasteBook" ... [it even has a] service similar to iTunes Essentials, which are pre-compiled playlists users can browse and use to discover new artists and songs. TasteBook currently has about a dozen featured collections, such as kid-friendly or vegetarian recipes, that users can browse to get ideas."⁸⁵ Later, in 2016 BuzzFeed introduced a similar cookbook product, The Tasty Cookbook, customizable based on their favorite BuzzFeed Tasty videos.⁸⁶

But it is not just a matter of food culture convergence in-print or digital, or utilitarian recipe dictation or story of a recipe, but also one of modes of interaction and social engagement. And again, there is a nostalgic sentiment that permeates back to even as recently as the mid 2000's. For example, Weiss calls for a "slow blog movement,"

Although I love my phone and I totally appreciate that it's where most of the action is, I do feel a little sentimental about reading on our computers. Part of me wonders if there's going to be a backlash—a slow blogging movement. I don't know if [content] will always be images and videos as people's attention spans get shorter and shorter. Which one will win in the end?⁸⁷



Figure 9: (Source: CNET)

⁸⁴ Luissa Weiss, cited in Vicky Zeamer, "Why One of the Internet's First Food Bloggers Is Calling for a Slow Blog Movement," MOLD :: Designing the Future of Food, July 20, 2017, <https://thisismold.com/visual/publications/luisa-weiss-wednesday-chef-slow-blog>.

⁸⁵ Jennifer Guevin, "TasteBook Kicks Homemade Recipe Books up a Notch," CNET, October 24, 2007, <https://www.cnet.com/news/tastebook-kicks-homemade-recipe-books-up-a-notch/>.

⁸⁶ "Tasty Cookbook," Tasty Shop, accessed December 12, 2017, <https://tastyshop.com/collections/tasty-cookbook>.

⁸⁷ Luissa Weiss, cited in Vicky Zeamer, "Why One of the Internet's First Food Bloggers Is Calling for a Slow Blog Movement," MOLD :: Designing the Future of Food, July 20, 2017, <https://thisismold.com/visual/publications/luisa-weiss-wednesday-chef-slow-blog>.

Chapter 2 - Mainstream Diners Participate in Food Text Creation and Why

Howard S. Becker famously said that, “the world of art mirrors the society at large.”⁸⁸ Different art-creation communities exhibit different social norms and complimentary sets of accepted behaviors and practices. The way a person is oriented within these communities is indicative of their orientation to the social world. Members of certain groups build up typical routines and conventions for how to behave in certain situations.⁸⁹ In other words, art communities perpetuate unspoken guidelines for creation and consumption of art objects that reflect broader social perspectives. The mainstream food blogging community is not immune to this issue of content sameness.

The angle at which people shoot the food they choose to post, the captions they write... Those that just write a stupid pun about food. Or they'll write oh check out my favorite brunch... It's all the same. – David Ma

David Ma, a food influencer and director, is discussed in the latter part of this chapter. But first, what is important about his statement is that there is a clearly established homogeneity abundant in visual food-related digital culture and its related trends that have emerged as a visual vernacular. Expansion of discourse around food and its preparation coincides with this emergence of the widely circulated food texts via the digital social media platforms. So, while there is a broader conversation around food and food culture than ever before, more images does not necessarily mean that more people have access to “the good bits” of food culture. Almost every fine dining chef or employee I interviewed felt the need to clarify; the expansion of social media content creation about fine dining experiences did not constitute a “democratization of fine dining.” Instead, what was being expanded was a conversation about the ecosystem of fine dining, including the food, skills, ingredients, and nuances that go into creating a fine dining experience. That is to say, social media has opened the avenue for discourse about food experiences while the opportunity to actually taste and enjoy the physicality of food experiences have not changed.

⁸⁸Howard S Becker. “Art Worlds and Social Types.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 19, no. 6 (August 1976): 716.

⁸⁹*Ibid*, 703–18.

Chapter 1 focused on changed about food culture and food text production, in particular the advent of Web 1.0 and the decades preceding it. But food culture It has shifted into a convergence culture, enabled by digital media properties, where the role of producers and consumers has been changed into a situation more accurately reflected as a group of participants interacting with each other. And as I discussed in the previous sections about the building of food narrative and socio-political awareness, food became an even more powerful tool for representing oneself in a broadening media landscape. Gael Greene first referred to a person as a “foodie” in 1980 when one used sophisticated culinary consumption as a means of social distinction.⁹⁰ Again, identifying oneself relative to a specific culture, in this case food culture, is a way to craft personal narrative in order to show social values. The term “foodies” came along before the rise of the amplified self across digital social media platforms—users can not only create images of themselves, but also of the person and group they wish to be identified with.

The restaurant is a site for decisive social and cultural interactions, and digital food texts helped expand the engagement opportunities of the restaurant space.⁹¹ Around 2009, a new restaurant scene emerged, shrouded in sex appeal from its ever-changing themes and locations. Food trucks and “pop up” restaurants proliferated across the United States and Europe, and they enabled a new take-on collective enthusiasm of food culture. By popping up across communities in places not typically seen as being formalized restaurant spaces, these food “events” changed the cartography of where one could access and be entertained by food.

The cultural evolution of food trucks illustrates how dynamic food experiences gave way to being embedded with digital narratives. Let’s compare two food trucks from

⁹⁰ Gael Green. "What's Nouvelle? La Cuisine Bourgeoisie." June 2, 1980.

⁹¹ David Beriss, and David E. Sutton, eds. *The Restaurants Book: Ethnographies of Where We Eat*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007.

Los Angeles, the left from 1980 and the right from 2008.^{92, 93}



Figure 10: Left to right), a food truck on Venice Beach in 1980, then a Kogi food truck in Los Angeles in 2008.

The food truck from 1980 likely did not have an active following of “foodies” that followed its location in real time online, nor did eating food at it give the diner a social cache that could be amplified with the resulting social media post. In particular, the popularity of food trucks and other pop up events were fueled by way of spreading their locations and special events via real-time social media like Twitter.⁹⁴ They provided a way for diners to feel like they were a part of the process like they had never been before—diners would track the food trucks and exclusive pop-up events by “listening” for news over social media. It wasn’t just about getting food anymore or experiencing something exclusive, it was about how digital media made it possible for people to do both of those things in a very public way. Thus, the experience shifted to being even more powerful in its potential for garnering social capital, and also maybe some good food.

Food trucks and “pop up” restaurants allowed chefs to try new concepts in new places with much less financial risk than establishing a more permanent brick and mortar location.⁹⁵ This process, as famed *LA Times* food critic Jonathon Gold declared, sparked a new youth culture around food. “While nobody was paying attention,” Gold said, “food quietly assumed the place in youth culture that used to be occupied by rock ‘n’ roll—individually fierce and intensely political.”⁹⁶ In 2012, Roy Choi, the chef behind the

⁹² “Calisphere: Skater Kid at the Food Truck, Venice Beach.” Calisphere. Accessed March 13, 2018. <https://calisphere.org/item/e0aebec2055a2033613be5325aa95aa7/>.

⁹³ “Kogi BBQ Food Truck Celebrates 2 Years WED 11/24.” Your Next Bite. Accessed March 13, 2018. <http://www.yournextbite.com/2010/11/kogi-bbq-food-truck-celebrates-2-years-wed-1124.html>.

⁹⁴ Lorri Mealey, “Learn About the Basics of Pop-Up Restaurants with This Primer,” *The Balance*, accessed November 17, 2017, <https://www.thebalance.com/pop-up-restaurants-2888299>.

⁹⁵ Gregory Dicum, “At Pop-Up Restaurants, Chefs Take Chances With Little Risk,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 2010, sec. Food, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/12/dining/12sfdine.html>.

⁹⁶ Anthony Bourdain, *Medium Raw: A Bloody Valentine to the World of Food and the People Who Cook*, Reprint edition (New York: Ecco, 2011). 72.

Kogi food trucks which are often credited as one of the founding food establishments of the food truck movement, worked with CNN to create a digital series called Street Food. This digital series about food would be about more than food, Choi decided,

I thought, there are so many cooking shows out there. What if we just took the words 'Street Food' and made it a little more abstract? What if it related more to street knowledge, street politics, the streets themselves, the food? What if it wasn't just the cooking? What if it was the food that fueled the culture and the art? All of these things are intertwined, just like life is intertwined. So what if we were eating and cooking, but I'm eating and cooking with Jon Favreau who's talking about editing and about L.A., so it's not just about showing you how I cook, it's about how food is a part of it all.⁹⁷

This sentiment that food was about more than the recipe is one that characterized the shift to food culture as being accessible and built not just for the people, but by the people. Again, the barriers to accessing unique food experiences were lowered, but the barriers that still existed became social media literacy and a penchant for new food encounters. Food trucks and "pop-ups" renewed dining out into an event on a large-scale. Eating out became not just a task of finding a restaurant, but constantly following the changing nature of that restaurant, and seizing the opportunity to participate in an affordable food culture. While fine dining may have had the allure of exclusivity through the task of "securing" a reservation, food trucks and pop-ups often had the allure of exclusivity through impermanence but with an affordable price tag. Additionally, these food trucks and pop ups were often incorporated into cultural and community events, where diners legitimized a truck or a warehouse as a restaurant through their presence. A diner's presence that could now be shared digitally on social media, and therefore broadcasted to the world that one was participating in an exclusive event. Just as this moveable movement was on the rise, so were social media and cameras on phones. As diners traversed their cities following their favorite food truck, they increasingly had mobile phones in their pocket with cameras. In 2010 for the first time, just eight years after Nokia introduced the first camera on a phone, point-and-shoot camera sales declined as smartphones overtook them.⁹⁸ These movements got diners

⁹⁷ Nicole LaPorte, "How Roy Choi Built An Empire From One Beat-Up Taco Truck," Fast Company, November 18, 2014, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3038398/how-roy-choi-built-a-food-empire-from-one-beat-up-taco-truck>.

⁹⁸ Felix Richter, "Infographic: Are Smartphones Killing Digital Cameras?" Statista Infographics. February 24, 2017. Accessed October 02, 2017. <https://www.statista.com/chart/5782/digital-camera-shipments/>.

hooked into physically exploring seemingly exclusive food culture. Through the hunt of dining out and being active on social media, they could witness food culture expand across both physical space and digital networks.

Joserra Calvo, the Head of Front of House Operations at Mugaritz, said that the attitude about diners documenting their meal experiences has changed in the 21st century. Around 2005 there was one person from Mugaritz who would look over the social media presence of the restaurant. Calvo recalls a moment when his colleague came to the front of the room and said, "There is someone in the dining room that is posting from our tables!" For a few years after that, the front of house staff would make sure that if they knew someone was taking photos, they would make sure all of the information they needed for their posts was correct. But once it became common place, Calvo marks it as 2010 as when the trend became normalized, the staff stopped trying to look after photo-taking tables.⁹⁹

The ubiquity of food-photography and its acceptance is also evident in a not-so-obscure stylistic norm of taking photos of people taking photos of food. This trend of explicit displays of the food text creation process keeps on being posted all over Instagram. Users keep on posting photos of someone taking photos of food. It is an intrinsically meta practice. In particular, it demonstrates the awareness of the production component of everyday user-generated food texts. If anything, it embraces the lens of mediation the camera phone has introduced into the dynamic of the meal experience. It seems that many social media users are aware of the dynamics that go into producing food texts for social media platforms. However, this awareness does not seem to deter the interest and tendencies of users to pause their dining experiences to capture the visual dynamics of the food they are about to it.

⁹⁹ Joserra Calvo. Head of Front of House Operations at Mugaritz. Interview by Vicky Zeamer, August 30, 2017.



Figure 11: Two screenshots from Instagram of users posting photos of someone taking photos in 2017.

Restaurants are aware of this as well. The interiors of restaurants are changing to become more “Instagrammable,” as I’ll discuss, but some restaurants are going to extremes to get their diners to snap and share photos of their food. For example, one restaurant in London offered free “foodie Instagram packs” to diners that included, “a portable LED light, multi-device charger, clip-on wide-angle lens, tripod, and a selfie stick.”¹⁰⁰ As bizarre as it may seem for a restaurant to provide such a social media press kit for diners, it makes a bit more sense when the quality of social media content on digital media platforms is so influential in the success of restaurants.

User-generated food texts have become cornerstone of modern food culture. I hypothesize that food texts on social media are vessels for diners to convey stories through their social posting of their own content based on real life experiences in subtle ways that act more humbly than posting bank account receipts or invitations for exclusive events. Thus, food texts are not absent from the self-moderation of identity-

¹⁰⁰ Clint Rainey, “A Restaurant Is Giving Customers ‘Instagram Packs’ With Their Dinner.” Grub Street, July 13, 2017. <http://www.grubstreet.com/2017/07/dirty-bones-gives-guests-instagram-packs-with-dinner.html>.

forming posts and engagements on social media. In regards to social media content, Lapides et al. explored perceptions and uses of Facebook News Feed through a think aloud and semi-structured interview-based study. They noted a complex dynamic amongst, “friends, the variety of social conventions, and the feelings of pressure and judgment present on Facebook.”¹⁰¹ Additionally, researchers from Facebook ran an in-situ study where they found that the more social updates a user is exposed to, the more likely the user is to share information as well.¹⁰²

Why does it matter that the creation of food texts for social media reflect something about the creators of the texts? Sociologist Erving Goffman contended in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that each person within a social interaction is attempting to guide and control impressions that are formed about themselves. Likewise, interpreting social data about others are key parts of survival within social interactions as it is important to be able to anticipate the outcome or end product of the activity as well as the other person’s feelings toward themselves. As full data about another person, their intentions, and their true feelings is often unavailable, people typically infer these aspects of social interactions by using clues such as hints, expressive gestures, cues, and/or status symbols. That is to say, without knowing someone fully, impressions are drawn by interpreting outward appearances and gestures.¹⁰³ Or in the case of a social-media-mediated society, digital social media content becomes a part of the information analyzed by people in order to form impressions.

With this in mind, the person creating the food text is therefore shaping the content in a particular way in order to communicate a particular story about not just the food, but themselves as an actor in society engaging with the food and its meanings. For home chefs, this isn’t quite a problem as home chefs have typically always viewed the food they cook at home as having deep personal meaning, as they cook for themselves and for others with food dictated by politically and economically determined means of procurement, social and cultural norms, diets and nutritional considerations (or lack

¹⁰¹ Paul Lapides, Apoorve Chokshi, Sheelagh Carpendale, and Saul Greenberg. “News Feed: What’s in It for Me?” In Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 163–172. CHI ’15. New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702554>.

¹⁰² Bakshy, Eytan, Itamar Rosenn, Cameron Marlow, and Lada Adamic. “The Role of Social Networks in Information Diffusion.” In Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on World Wide Web, 519–528. WWW ’12. New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2187836.2187907>.

¹⁰³ Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. 1 edition, 249. New York, NY: Anchor, 1959.

thereof), or simply out of utility. However, when it comes to diners in restaurants becoming the major creators and distributors of visual representations of food via social media, the narrative formation emerges from a spectator (diner) rather than the original creator (the chef).

What stories are being told? Many of the stories of eaters in restaurants typically reflect the one of the few normalized and homogenous narratives that have emerged. These narratives typically reflect: 1.) a description of what the food is, 2.) an explanative remark about how good the food tasted, or another sensorial dimension, and/or 3.) a “witty” joke about relating to the food, such as a pun or popular culture reference, and/or 4.) an informative description of the food’s procurement, preparation, or consumption which helps the user to establish virtue signaling to their social media followers. However, these patterns are being recognized by viewers and some chose to subvert these clichés. With that said, though, these norms currently persist through social media content creation and interaction.

I employ a series of vignettes of food text creators to explore the norms and practices around food text creation from a non-professional chef perspective. Instead, these food text creators represent a cohort of individuals who profit, either culturally and or financially, simply from the production of food texts versus the production of consumable food itself.

Zooming into the World of an Instagram Food Blog

Before delving into the nuances of social media impressions of fine dining through users’ content and engagement, it is crucial to explore the norms and best practices of visual representations of food on social media in general in Web 2.0. In order to do so, we see how a group of friends mediate their own interactions with food by turning their dining adventures into well-documented, well-received food blog posts on Instagram.

To those who hold fine dining in high regard, Boston is held back from being considered a “world class city” due to its lack of Michelin Stars and rumored reclusive food scene. I grew up in Boston and am often confronted with people’s perceptions of Boston’s food scene. They envision eating lobster rolls near a wharf, or can imagine how their tongues would feel pressed against the roof of their mouth as they ordered clam chow-dAh (emphasis on the hard A-sound). However, the Boston food scene is softening

into a much more palpable and exciting form from the energy of its academic electricity and gritty work-hard mentality. What is still lacking in Boston, however, is recognition.

This ambition has spilled into the realm of food blogging.

@TwoHungryBostonians is a food blog on Instagram that has evolved from a few friends who just enjoyed going out to eat together and posting on social media, to one of the main social media influencers of the Boston food scene.

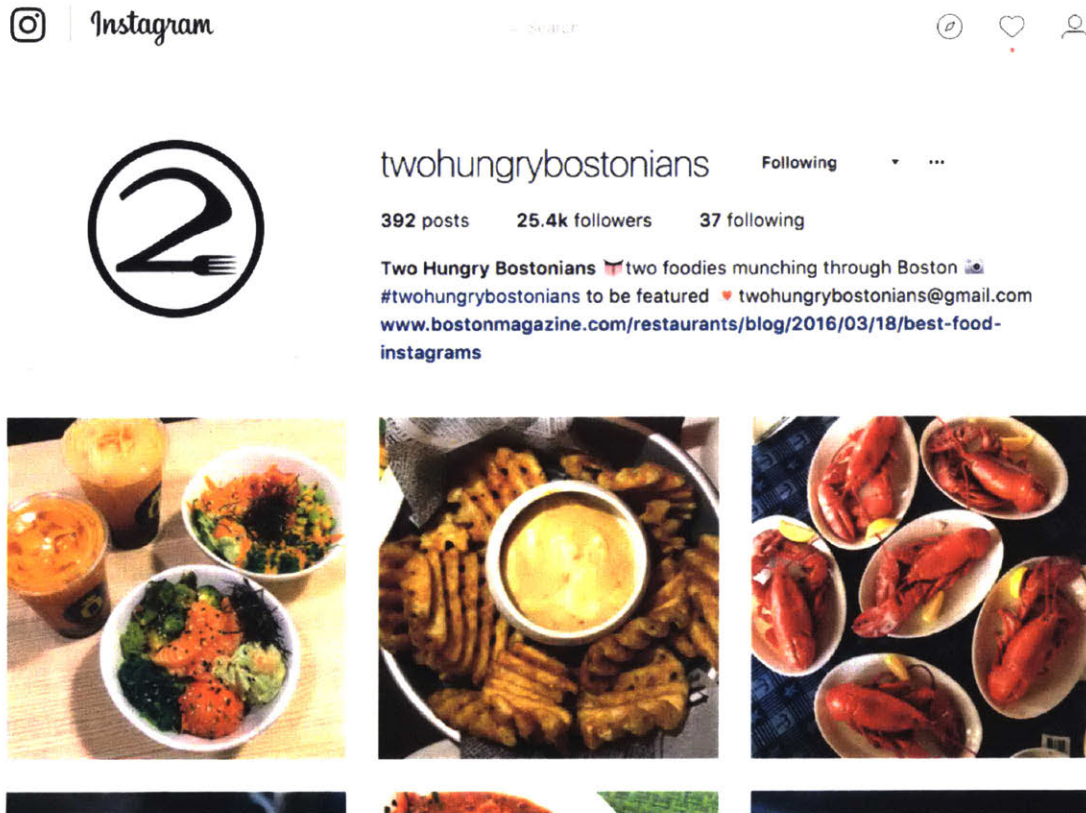


Figure 12: Screenshot of the *@TwoHungryBostonians* Instagram profile, taken on November 3rd, 2017.

“We gained a lot of attention and it became fun after the realization that we could actually document Boston cuisine,” one of the women behind the Instagram *TwoHungryBostonians* confessed “It was something we never considered because Boston seemed to be boring as a food place, but actually there a lot of restaurants that we have not yet been to, [and that is exciting]. We think most people only go to a few [restaurants that are the most immediate results] on Yelp or searches like that.” And with over 21K followers as of early March 2017, many curious eyes and hungry stomachs are looking to the account’s content to find the next best place to eat is within the curving streets of Boston.

But do not be mistaken; the *TwoHungryBostonians* Instagram account is not here to replace the critical voice of restaurant reviews, either informally like Yelp or formally like The Boston Globe's Food & Dining section, or even the sites of Web 1.0. When asked to describe the *TwoHungryBostonians* Instagram account and its content, the blogger described it as simply, "Pretty pictures of food from Boston." To a certain extent, *TwoHungryBostonians* is limited as it is just an Instagram account with no other web presence. To think of the account as a mere compilation of food images is to limit the scope of both their Instagram-based food blog and the whole phenomena of visual food media. There is something else going on here.

All of the images on their Instagram account are of food, and the captions often make world play based off of the foods featured or ignore the food-nature of content of the photo altogether. "In our captions of the images, we won't talk about what dish is at the restaurant... We don't rate the dish, and we don't critique it. If a restaurant is not good, we just won't post it." Curation of the images and the conversational captions get woven together to create a narrative of dining where food becomes the center of a greater experience rather than the sole purpose.

Dining is such a visceral experience with the smells wafting across tables and textures mashing against teeth, but eating can often feel like a utilitarian function. Despite our bodies' need for nutrients, our minds and hearts have a way of bringing us to restaurants to additionally satisfy social and exploratory aspirations. The blogger points out that they work hard to make sure they are profiling a variety of restaurants instead of just popular chains, as that is, as she puts it, "part of the job of the influencer." By influencer, she is referring to the marketing-based term used to identify individuals who have established themselves as holding credibility and perceived expertise within a community. In that way, food bloggers have positioned themselves as authorities on where one can find the most satisfactory of gustatory experiences.

"[If you look at the statistics of our Instagram account activity,] a lot of users are actually just tagging other users or sending a private message to other users [with our content]. So, people are just saying, 'let's go here if it is better'... so I think the appeal is having Instagram access as an introduction to different types of food or new places that they could go to in the future."



Figure 13: Check out the comments– Instagram users tag their friends and discuss "wanting to go" to the restaurant featured

Tagging friends on and messaging them the content then extends the conversations from being just between the content creator and the viewer, but instead creates a web of past and future experiences of not only the restaurants but experiences that extend the restaurants.¹⁰⁴ The social aspect of these visual food experiences is not to be understated. While these likes and tags are outwardly social in aim with the end goal of eating at new restaurants, the blogger insists that their audience finds their food media by looking for media unrelated to food.

"The hashtags that consistently for us are ones similar to #lifestyle or hashtags not referring to a specific food.... Such as #eatingin, #foodporn, #aesthetic... just hashtag things that young people look up." She says, pointing out that Instagram users are not searching for hashtags of food directly, such as #scallop or #salad, but instead broader lifestyle-oriented hashtags. In that way, Instagram becomes a porthole into a deep abyss of aspirational portrayals of "real" life experiences.

For example, a post from the middle of February features a flambéed dessert with the caption "It's lit," a reference to both the flaming nature of the food but also the

¹⁰⁴ Zizi, Papacharissi ed. *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*. 1 edition. New York: Routledge, 2010.

colloquial expression for when something is exciting or amazing, and the hashtag #lastfridaynight. "They find us when they are looking up things that they want to see. So food is part of a lifestyle [idea] that appeals to a population who want to be seen as [being a part of a] eating out lifestyle... A nice food aesthetic lifestyle."



Figure 14: Caption reads, "It's lit @yvonesboston #lastfridaynight #twohungrybostonians"

What is this "nice food aesthetic lifestyle?" How does one compose an aspirational food image? The visual language of food bloggers, such as image styling or captions, is a language that bloggers see as an informal framework. This style is not directly taught, but instead learned by seeing what other successful content creators are doing. Perceived quality is therefore established by the creator's earned feedback. That is, proof that content is "working" is gauged by the number of followers and likes on their content. The composition of the images and their complimentary aesthetic then spreads across multiple users and the whole phenomena of visual food media.

"Well certainly... there are certain types of shots that everyone across social networks use. One is the top down shot, which is the overview with a couple of central dishes, one or two central dishes that are fully in view, and a couple of dishes that are half way cut. Then there is the option that just a view of the table with no angle, [just looking directly at the dish]. And then there is the cheese shot that is, for example, for

things that are sticky or liquid-y. It is preferable to get a video generally because you are pulling apart something that has cheese and that is so satisfying to see, see that string.



Figure 15: Video of caramel being dribbled over a stack of cookies

“But the most important consideration is lighting and quality of the photo, so if the photo is bad, no matter how good the restaurant was or how pretty it looked in person, we won’t post it because that’s just guaranteed to get less likes on our Instagram account.”

With that in mind, a food blogger’s images stand not only to act as stark records of a meal, but instead more of an affective tool for communicating a “vibe” and story. In the world of food blogging, success is ultimately judged by getting other users to buy into the story one is telling, and to do so in a way that their fingers double-tap on the image. Without this feedback, food bloggers can feel as though their content is self-serving and uninteresting to other people.

This idea of seeking positive feedback of posted content is relevant to *TwoHungryBostonians*’ humble beginnings. As *TwoHungryBostonians* is actually three hungry Bostonians who are college students in non-food and media related majors, their methods started and remain slightly loose. Notes about content creation efficacy are traded through Facebook message threads, and tricks of the trade are learned through on in the field experience and observation from other successful food bloggers. Success

in this arena therefore justifies more time and effort in this hobby-like endeavor for the group.

But also, in the same vein, the blogger I spoke with remained skeptical to refer to herself in more professional leaning terms, often prefacing responses with remarks such as, "This is definitely not a professional opinion but..." This perspective of a food blogger who fell into this media creation position points out the more wide-reaching angle of social media sites as spaces for people to transform their perspectives into ones of influence.

"I guess from my point of view, despite the fact that I do the whole food blogging thing, I'm not really a food expert, you know what I mean? I feel that TV, newspaper, and book publications are for people who are really into that... And I don't have a specific interest [or expert positioning] in a way that is alienating to users who would just be satisfied seeing this [kind of food content] briefly," she points out.

However, she does take a moment to realize that while specific food media channels are certainly formalized in a food-focused cultural sphere, there is a clear space for her and her colleagues to share their perspective.



Figure 16: An Instagram video from Boston's Eataly's preview event

"We were [at the Boston Eataly preview] event amongst actual TV stations who had signed up as representatives, and other media people and reporters. But here I am, just an Instagram blogger... but at the same time, to look it from a different perspective, actually our Instagram blog most of the time gets more attraction than some TV or radio stations even though they're more funded and more officially established, so to speak. Because of the user base and what the user base uses. Instagram is instant and easy."

The Power of Food Texts for Foodie Fame and Frappuccinos: Instagram Visual Trends, Hooks, and Colors



10 INSTAGRAM-WORTHY FALL COCKTAILS

Maple, apple, pumpkin and cranberry are just a few of the season's stars in these fall drinks. Raise a glass to the changing leaves and changing flavors that you'll find across Boston's cocktail offerings, including hints of plum and thyme. Cheers to cooler weather! [Read More](#)

-!- drink like a pro

Figure 17: A section of BostonChefs.com's "E-Licious, the insider's guide to dining" newsletter on September 28, 2017.

Whether people are open to talking about it or not,¹⁰⁵ there is money to be made from harnessing the power of social media's obsession with food photography. An advertisement from Instagram for Business about the business benefits of using Instagram's platform for food related products (Figure 3). Most notably, the business service stresses that over half of Instagram's user base is "passionate" about food. After the fact, Instagram for Business shows off all of the capabilities of the platform to

¹⁰⁵ A large number of lower- to mid-tier dining establishments that had sizable Instagram followers and "popular" content refused to talk to us about their social media strategies.

convert engagement with the platform into dollars for the sponsor. In particular, users can watch videos of recipe demonstrations and then click a “shop now” banner on the bottom of the video. Then finally, a stylistically normative and colorful shot shows a hand sprinkling cilantro over a plate of tacos in birds-eye-view—all aligned with the norms of the user generated food photography culture. With this stylistic similarity, the advertisers are shown that they have a way to blend into the user-generated cultural obsession and possibly convert the engagement into profits.

With wide acceptance of these stylistic production norms, it is easy for companies and restaurants to turn the embrace of a fad into an egregious embodiment of social media trends. For example, it is not so hard to stumble into a “chic” eatery in Manhattan and find yourself transported to a set of an Instagram photo shoot. What do I mean? It seems that many restauranteurs have figured out what visual elements diners most often capture, edit, and then share on their social media feeds and therefore have taken these insights and built their restaurants to include as many of these elements as possible. In a peculiar way, trendy restaurant design has become a morphing of the physical to the digital and back again. It has become a feedback cycle.

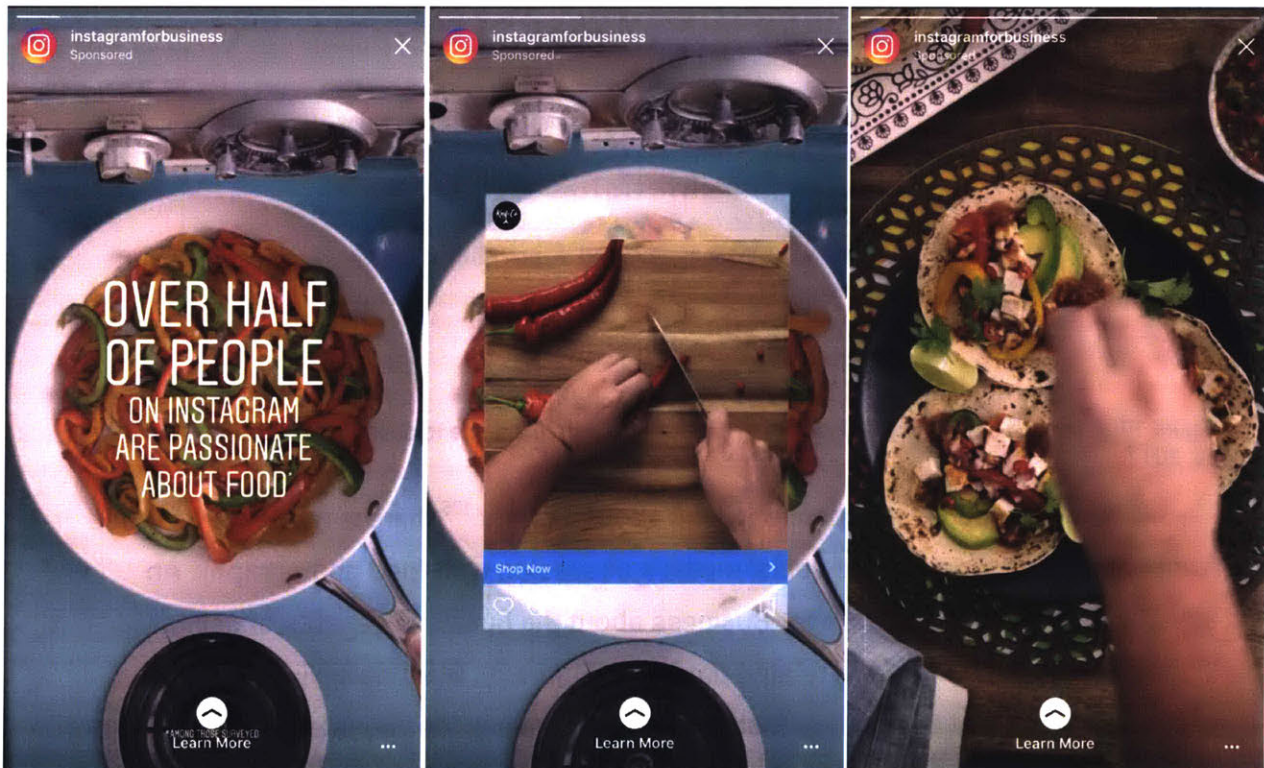


Figure 18: Ad for Instagram for Business shown

Hannah Collins, a restaurant designer based in San Francisco now asks clients, “what’s going to be your hook?”¹⁰⁶ By hook, she is referring to “Instagram triggers” such as colorful tiles or banana wall paper. In short, what aesthetically will tease customers to take photos of the space?

After spending over a year exploring restaurants on Instagram, you start to recognize these “hooks” that Collins refers to—neon signs with funny phrases, bold wallpaper, colorful tiles, and a lot of contrasting bright colors. The two restaurants I point to on the following pages, Cha Cha Matcha and Broken Coconut, are both trendy fast casual restaurants in Manhattan. Almost all of the Instagram posts tagged at the locations look the same—the same framing, the same focus on the “hooks,” so the impression is that everyone must get the same sort of experience while at these spots? Well, on Yelp, many of the reviews mention that the spots (respectively) are “good for pictures,” “very Instagrammable,” or “Insta-bait... but not good food.” Broken Coconuts, for example, only has 3 stars on Yelp and yet it continues to rule Instagram. People are not coming for the food, it

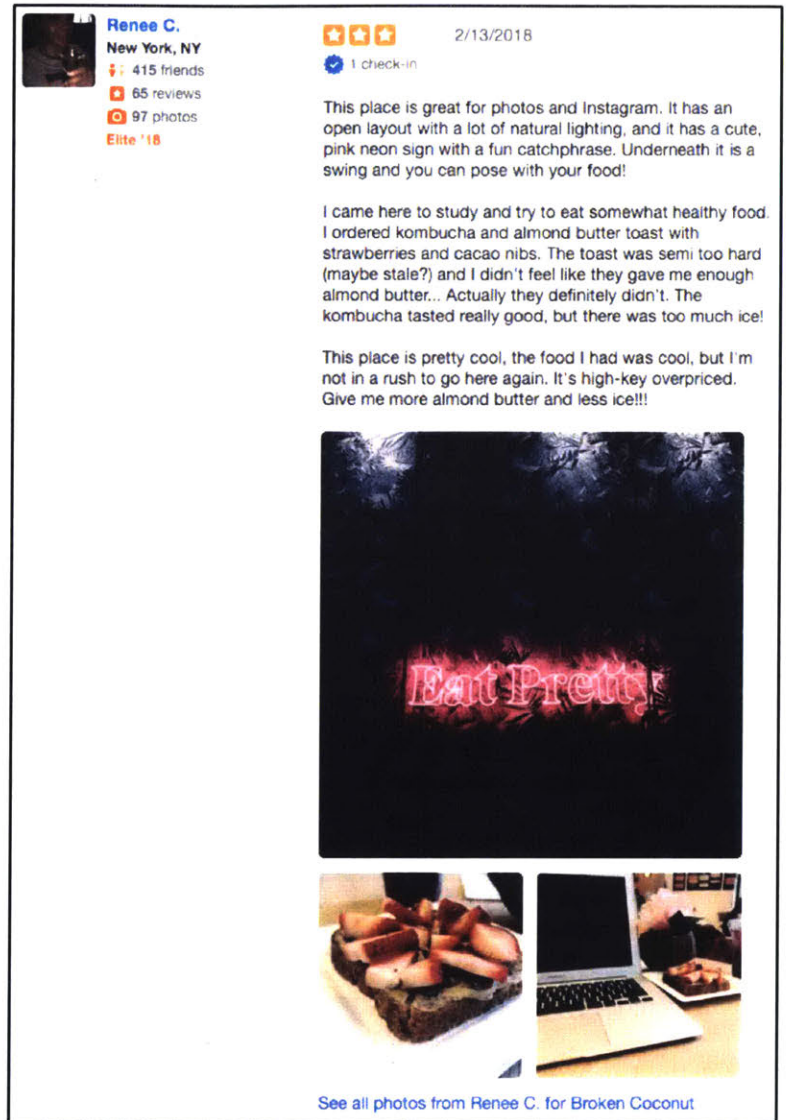


Figure 19: Advertisement from Instagram for Business shown in author’s Instagram video-feed on November 9, 2017

¹⁰⁶ Casey Newton, “How Instagram Is Reshaping Restaurant Design.” The Verge, July 20, 2017. <https://www.theverge.com/2017/7/20/16000552/instagram-restaurant-interior-design-photo-friendly-media-noche>.



Figure 21: Screenshot of Cha Cha Matcha's photos tagged at their Manhattan location on March 5, 2018. Look similar?

The notion of an Instagram “visual hook” mimics the trend of colorful foods designed to go “viral.” Take the unicorn food trend. Sophie Egan, a food writer and Culinary Institute of America writer, refers to outrageous and egregious concoctions of food design as “stunt foods.” She cites, for example, the Dorito’s Locos Tacos which were so popular when they were released in 2012 that the chain hired 15,000 new



employees in order to keep up with rapid growth in sales.¹⁰⁸ Egan proclaims that stunt foods are about, “celebrating decadence, rather than hiding it.”¹⁰⁹ Instagram posts tagged with “#locostacos” primarily featured users bragging about “finally” getting their hands on these tacos. Comments from other users also expressed the same sentiment.

What about stunt foods and contrasting neon restaurant interiors seemingly begs visitors to take a photo of it to post on social media? Perhaps the colors used have something to do with it. That is to say, too much color can be seen as being dangerous, as David Batchelor argues, “color has been the object of extreme prejudice in Western culture.”¹¹⁰ Within Western culture, color is marked as being superficial and cosmetic.¹¹¹ One way to mitigate the nefarious draw of colors is to exert control over them by harnessing their unpredictable power for one’s own agenda.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Sophie Egan, “The Age of Stunt Foods.” *Devoured: How What We Eat Defines Who We Are*, Reprint edition., 221. New York, NY: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Sophie, 222.

¹¹⁰ David Batchelor. “Chromophobia.” *Color, The Film Reader*, edited by Angela Dalle Vacche and Brian Price, 63. New York; London: Routledge, 2006.

¹¹¹ Batchelor, 64.

¹¹² Batchelor, 66-7.



Figure 22: Starbucks Unicorn Frappuccino, "The elusive unicorn from medieval legend has been making a comeback. Once only found in enchanted forests, unicorns have been popping up in social media with shimmering unicorn-themed food and drinks. Now Starbucks is taking the trend to a new level with its first Unicorn Frappuccino® blended beverage, available starting Wednesday, April 19, through Sunday, April 23, while supplies last."¹¹³

Subsequently, writers and painters also saw color as exerting an unpredictable power over them. Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw colors as being embedding with representations of what interested people, and therefore the colors alone were without any connotations.¹¹⁴ When Aldous Huxley described his experience on mescaline, he noted a flood of color that morphed everyday objects in a way that "[made him see] a perceptual innocence" such as "seeing as-if-for-the-first-time, the recovery of a lost innocence." The account includes observations of, "Red books, like rubies; emerald books; lapis lazuli books whose color was so intense, so intrinsically meaningful, that they seemed to be on the point of leaving the shelves to thrust themselves more insistently on my attention."¹¹⁵

While color is used in food porn to draw an attraction between the prospective consumer and the food, there is also a power dynamic between these two entities. Agency associated with food porn is, for example, exhibited in cinema. Eugenia Brinkema discusses how food aesthetics can demonstrate power by tying together Aurel Kolnai's exploration of "psychological issues with phenomena belonging to the sphere of descriptive aesthetics" and discussions of culinary experiences in Peter Greenway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*,

¹¹³ "Starbucks New Color and Flavor Changing Unicorn Frappuccino." Starbucks Newsroom, April 18, 2017.

¹¹⁴ Batchelor, 68.

¹¹⁵ David Batchelor. "Chromophobia." *Color, The Film Reader*, edited by Angela Dalle Vacche and Brian Price, 69. New York ; London: Routledge, 2006.

The chef Richard's gastronomic color scheme for menu pricing is accounted for explicitly in relation to this desire [for what Kolnai theorized as rot having interconnectedness of decay and nourishment]: 'I charge a lot for anything black: grapes, olives, black currants. People like to remind themselves of death. Eating black food is like consuming death, like saying, 'Death, I'm eating you.'" Consuming death in the logic of Richard's menu involves a formal incorporating: eating a color.¹¹⁶

Food porn is thus a loaded creative work that pulls together concept of color of food being a captivation of transcendental experiences. The dynamics of visual food media that stresses the aesthetic qualities of food point to a larger statement about the power of food porn. By engrossing oneself in visual food media, one is prolonging the act of food consumption beyond the act of eating. By curating visual food media, the consumer is assembling a collection of idealized consumption experiences. Hence, engaging in visual food media, especially visual food media with a social component is a statement of declaring one's food preferences (with all of its nuances) and declaring a transcendental view of society.

Deciphering the Trend of Rapid Recipes and The Illusion of User Engagement

Now that the social significance of these visual representations of food and experience have been brought out, there is still more to be understood in terms of how these visual images work formally as tools for storytelling. Formal analysis of a popular visual vernacular of recipe videos clarifies the power of visual composition, involving food in this case, to communicate a story. "Rapid recipe videos," a particular visual vernacular/sub-genre of online recipe videos popularized by BuzzFeed's Tasty channel, emerged as a trendsetting visual style for recipe video creation across content creators, from professional media companies to amateur food bloggers. These recipe videos have been taking over news feeds, as Tasty was the 6th most watched Facebook Video

¹¹⁶ Eugenia Brinkema. "Rot's Progress: Gastronomy according to Peter Greenway. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 5, 80. 2010.

Publisher with 1.2 billion views in March 2017.¹¹⁷¹¹⁸ The videos are typically under two minutes long and filmed from a bird's eye view perspective, showing just a pair of hands cooking a recipe. Rapid recipe videos have been increasingly present on social media news feeds.



Rapid recipe videos consequently use formal elements, web design best practices, and the semiotics of food preparation to create content that engages users beyond teaching them how to cook. The features of mainstream digital video viewing practices, such as autoplay-muted videos embedded in Facebook newsfeeds and the algorithms that contribute to their increasing viewership, inform this content building.

¹¹⁷ Tanya Basu, "How Recipe Videos Colonized Your Facebook Feed." *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2016. <http://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/how-recipe-videos-colonized-your-facebook-feed>.

¹¹⁸ Bree Brouwer, "Top Facebook Publishers March 2017." Tubular Insights, 2017. <http://tubularinsights.com/top-facebook-video-creators/>.

Phenomenology and semiotics philosophers further clarify the ways in which media is constructed in order to elicit affect. Interaction within these videos is communicated through the use of hands and fingers gripping cooking tools and food. Hands are visual signifiers of touch and examination in imagery across visual mediums.¹¹⁹ Therefore, hands become the extenders of sensorium. Again, this is a witnessed interaction between user and object. Hand gestures, defined, as movements of the body that express an intention, are the only pieces of the human form depicted within these rapid recipe videos.¹²⁰ Hence, hand gestures are a crucial part of communicating the production and consumption of food, as they are the human mediators between the viewer and the inanimate objects. Within these rapid recipe videos, hands are seen as severed from the body as fingers grip spoons and whisk a bowl of liquids into emulsified "composed dishes," a departure from their original disparate identities as "ingredients." As such, the severing of the body also prioritizes profiling participation and exploration with the visual enticing affect of sensation, versus sensation motivating participation physically.



Figure 23: Scenes from "Deep-Fried Sticky Ribs" rapid recipe video via BuzzFeed's Tasty channel [Buzzfeed]

These videos document a process of transformation of elements by humans that, when deconstructed and mediated through a video, become vessels of affect. Gilles Deleuze discusses Charles Sanders Peirce's classification of signs and images (semiotics) by exposing how an action-image is constructed, "everything which only exists by being opposed, by and in a duel...[these] power-qualities become 'forces.'"¹²¹ Therefore, these shots of human intervention onto food objects reference a cinematic technique of enticing affect. When scenes of transformative action-images are edited

¹¹⁹ Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*. 1 edition. Ithaca, N.Y.; London: Cornell University Press, 2002.

¹²⁰ Vilém Flusser, *Gestures*. Translated by Nancy Ann Roth. Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2014.

¹²¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Univ Of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986.

together in the way that rapid food videos condense so many procedures in such a short period, the videos take on an affective charge.

Behaviors that have been encoded onto food as a symbol are engaged by the content creator to communicate a narrative of labor and production. There is the prescribed formula of the food going from raw ingredients to cooked meals. Specifically, this narrative of food transformation and vicarious voyeurism of effortless labor, which in turn, entice affect to create a feeling of accomplishment from watching the process unfold through the film. This narrative thread of labor and achievement of sorts can be communicated to viewers by watching videos like these rapid recipes or even looking at mythical unicorn food creations.

Note that many for-profit companies have adopted the visual style of these rapid recipe videos. While BuzzFeed was the first to virally use them for their Tasty series, they have persisted for over a year as the predominant recipe video cinematography style.

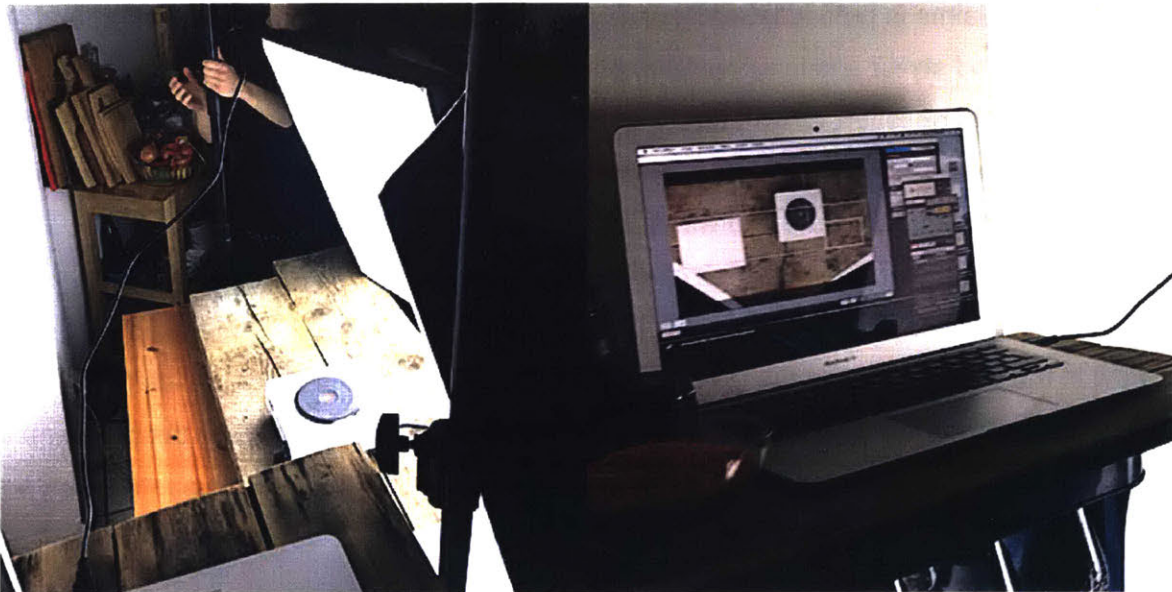


Figure 24: Recipe suggestion app start-up KPTN COOK of Berlin begins to set up for the filming of a rapid recipe video. Note the full lighting, camera rigged up into a bird's eye view, and different natural backgrounds used as staging.

Web 2.0 and its reliance on user-generated content therefore enables affective elements of subjects portrayed in content to be vessels for user-specific communication, from one creator to a whole community of digital users.

Monetizing Stylistic Norms Through Noms: David Ma as a Food Influencer and Advertising Creative

All of these media creation trends converge into a community of practice for social-media food text users. Visual vernacular trends get constantly reinforced by users who continue to engage with, either by watching, sharing, or creating, the content that demonstrates a fluency in these social media food culture stylistic trends. Advertisers and organizations with their respective products and brands try to penetrate this community of practice and consumption by demonstrating their fluency of the foodie culture by through their own content creation.

So, who gets hired to help advertisers and organizations cash in on this community of practice? “DAVID MAKES FOOD FAMOUS” food artist David Ma’s “About” section proclaims in bolded lettering on his business website. For Ma, his background as a culinary food stylist and in advertising positions him well to “combine surprising narratives with polished, cinematic food imagery.”¹²² More aptly, he calls himself a “food influencer and director.”¹²³ An interview with Ma highlighted the convergence of visual vernacular trends, both tired and wired, and marketing opportunities.

Ma pointed to the evolution of visual food culture, “Chefs have always seen plating and food as art. But now it has become more. I guess there’s an interest to that now in the process of how the foods made like there’s videos about of the inside [process] of food. [Through social media content of the cooking process,] people [can] go inside a kitchen and see how their favorite dish is made. There’s a fascination around [food] that there wasn’t there before. And now with Instagram I would say that a lot of

Major Food Related Visual Media Trends (as Told by David Ma):

- Shooting food from an overhead perspective
- Lifting ramen or noodles high into the air for a photo
- Tear a donut in half to show the insides
- Sped up video of a bird’s eye view shot of food (a la BuzzFeed’s Tasty)
- Cheese pulls

¹²² “About.” David Ma. Accessed March 26, 2018. <http://davidmafilms.com/about/>.

¹²³ David Ma, Google Small Thanks The Linden Store, 2018. <https://vimeo.com/251531668>.

people enjoy the aspect of making table top layouts overhead layouts with ingredients spread across the table. Everyone does the same thing on Instagram.”¹²⁴

There are two sides to Ma’s own content creation. On one side, he takes an artistic license to riff on stylistic content creation norms of the social media food culture community in order to create fresh explorations into the possibilities of food and digitally circulated micro-films (of a few minutes each). Then on the other side, these creative pieces act as calling cards for him to take on paid work creating content with a “potential for virality” for outlets such as BuzzFeed, Popsugar, and *Food & Wine Magazine*.

Figure 25: Note the rapid recipe videos described in the previous section. Ma often subverts the visual vernacular of those rapid recipe videos in order to create similar content but with a twist for media outlets and food brands. Below is from a piece David Ma directed for Popsugar, "Let Belle Teach You How to Make Enchanted Apple Roses" (April 23, 2017)



¹²⁴ David Ma, Food artist and creative director. Interview by Vicky Zeamer, November 29, 2017.

Ma, in a way, is a shining example of how an understanding of homogeneous visual vernacular and other digital food culture trends combine with the market smarts in order to engulf online food culture.

Ma said, "Well, brands can go to conglomerates like BuzzFeed, Tastemade, Tastingtable to make branded content videos in the style of their content that does well from an engagement perspective. Like you know King Arthur flour can sponsor a BuzzFeed video and make a recipe with their flour and have the packaging on BuzzFeed's video. As far as the look goes, that's kind of how things go like advertising takes from what's popular and recycles it or regurgitates it into an ad. And that's not a knock off via advertising, it's what they do with trends as far as if they see something that's doing well. A lot of us as creatives draw inspiration from the things that are popular in culture and then make something new out of it. So, on that note it's a lot more social being done and there's traditional media advice."

The works he creates are self-aware but simultaneously subvert of norms of visual-based food culture that lives and breathes on the internet. One of his most famous web series is called #FoodFilms: Recipe Videos in the Style of Famous Directors.

You know I was on Instagram and seeing that everybody was shooting these top BuzzFeed style videos. And while they're great from an engagement perspective, there's just zero creativity left in them. So, I started thinking about how would a famous director would approach these videos. How would West Anderson approach the video, for example? Well he would shoot it with symmetry and there would be a rhythm to it. There would be a beautiful color palette which would be the still or would be a slate granite countertop...

My first boss taught me with advertising that really all it is, is bringing two unrelated things together and finding that one comic thread. And for [my videos it was] bringing the tie in the world of food and film together. And creating something new like a new genre for it. That's what the goal is with food films. It was to show people that recipe videos don't have to be boring they can be fun. The food industry needs more fun and life and [I] think [that] a lot of [the food industry] is very serious... It's good to have a little fun with food.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ David Ma, Food artist and creative director. Interview by Vicky Zeamer, November 29, 2017.

By making rapid recipe videos in the style of famous directors, the power of creativity and cinematic vision stands to show just how homogenous the standard rapid recipe videos are. In other words, it is not that the videos are made in the styles of the Directors with great accuracy, it is the contrast of different takes on cinematography and recipe storytelling that emerges as the takeaway message.

While Ma embraces and puts his own spin on many visual norms of food-related visual media, there is a line he is not willing to cross for the sake of getting the perfect food story captured with his camera.

[People have] little hand-held rectangles that they wrap a napkin around to defuse the light so they can shoot in a dark restaurant. I find that stuff annoying because it's like, you're definitely disrupting the atmosphere of the dining experience [for everyone else]. The when you're standing on chairs at brunch taking pictures over at the table. It almost always when you're at a New York diner that you see someone do that. [It's become] common place now at brunch to see that so it's not that weird.¹²⁶

Ma seems to simultaneously be frustrated and at peace with the fact that such behaviors in a restaurant have become accepted because more and more people understand that taking staged photos of one's food for social media has become normalized, even accepted. While he did not admit to carrying around a handheld light for content on his own Instagram, he still oftentimes uses his content to break the third wall by calling out the process of content creation and norms of social media visual food culture. Therefore, he blurs the line between being a diner who creates food texts and a business person who is put in charge of leveraging these diner-centered practices. He speaks about the unspoken.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

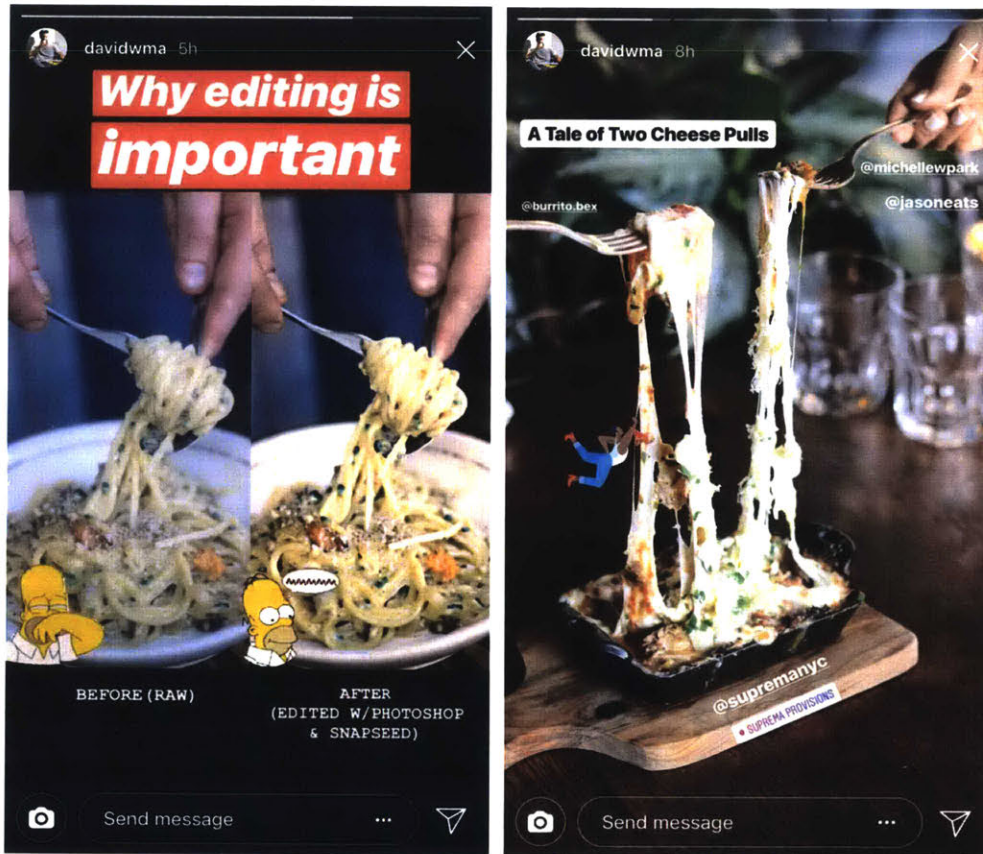


Figure 26: On the left, Ma calls out the fact that content curation and mediation takes place with food photography on Instagram. On the right, Ma explicitly identifies which stylistic norm he is utilizing.

Ma points to a divergence of narrative purpose of Instagram content between typical food-related content producers and chefs. “A lot of the chefs I notice are maybe not as concern with the aesthetic of their food and more just concerned about posting a picture from the kitchen versus a food blogger might have curated pictures.” While users are trying to get an aesthetically pleasing photo of their dish, the chefs try to tell the story of the process of cooking and transforming food.

As an expert in the field of marketing and food-related media content, Ma senses that there is an oversaturation of food pictures being everywhere. This particularly threatens chefs, who Ma says need to have Instagrams in order to stay relevant in the face of the content created by swarms of food bloggers who have visited their restaurant. “And to play the game and to stay relevant I feel like [chefs] have to [have Instagrams]. Some of them enjoy it because it lets them show [their work and process]. But I don’t know,” Ma digresses, “it’s just another way of marketing for their business.”¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Chapter 3 - Fine Dining Chefs and Cultural Production via Digital Social Media

The chefs' stories as shared through social media emerge as a spectacular stake in food culture's modern digital media ecosystem. Web 1.0 and 2.0 paved the way for users to share their food related experiences with their social media circles. Diners could use visual representations of food, a relatively subtle symbol, to communicate different aspects of their own identity and engagement with society. Digitally networked social media platforms created a globally connected space for not only lifestyle virtue-signaling, but also for discourse within a greater global food culture community.

Social media can be an amplifier for communication and related influence, but that amplification comes at a cultural cost. As the number of food texts proliferates, that also means that each individual food text gets drowned out. In contrast to the social media users who share photos of other chefs' food for their own identity-projection purposes, social media provides an opportunity for chefs to reclaim the narrative control of their own creations by sharing their specific food texts and related stories.

Narrative control is crucial to chefs as fine dining success relies on the accumulation of symbolic capital. As Bourdieu explained, symbolic capital refers to the accumulation of celebrity, consecration, or honor and is built upon a discussion of knowledge and recognition.¹²⁸ Fine dining success is often hinged not only on financial success (which, in many cases, means just not losing money), but also recognition of a chef's/restaurant's grasping of relevant knowledge. Within the food industry, this relevant knowledge can be manifested through a mastery of obscure or difficult cooking techniques, or an expert understanding of specific foodways, or even satisfactory execution of creative food-based interactions. Digital social media provides a way for chefs to display their knowledge while gaining recognition, through content engagement such as "likes" or comments, from their peers and others.

As the wave of food media swelled in the late 90's, the food industry was beginning to come to terms with how greater interactivity and expectations in food culture would impact their own roles within this ecosystem. I contend that social and

¹²⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson, 1st edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

visual media have become the domineering cultivator of expectations around visual food experiences. The food industry has been greatly impacted by the swelling of expectations and visual focus of food experiences, and that impact cannot be isolated to only the industry's role in producing food. In addition to an increased focus on visual components of meals, a chef's role within a fine dining organization now includes a personality and visioning component. In a 1999 article in *Food Arts* magazine, Michael Ruhlman said, "A great cook doesn't begin to encapsulate the job description of the modern chef. No longer tethered to blazing ranges, a chef is expected to be everything from a savvy businessperson to a matinee idol."¹²⁹

And this need for food industry professionals, in particular chefs, to provide a more robust experience than just a delicious meal is apparent in many ways. In the world of fine dining, what is at stake for chefs who do not actively produce their own food texts representing their food-based culinary creations? Interventions like Tock, a reservation software company co-founded by Nick Kokonas (Chicago restaurateur with ties to Alinea, amongst others), have shifted the restaurant reservation process from being one of saving a date to purchasing tickets for a concert or performance. For example, prospective diners choose their experience and pay the full ticket price before showing up to the restaurant.¹³⁰ But other factors go into how prospective diners envision their future meal experiences besides making the reservation itself. Now, expectations of the dining experience are more concrete, based on the breadth of food-related media content a person sees.

Many chefs of top restaurants today are active on Instagram. Jordi Roca, the top pastry chef in the world and one of the brothers of El Celler de Can Roca outside of Barcelona, is an active Instagram user himself and has also witnessed a drastic change in how digital media has changed the fine dining experience.

I remember five to ten years ago people could come not knowing what they would eat [at a restaurant]. Not having any idea of what the menu would be like, of what to expect from the dishes, or who we were, or even [the dishes] we had previously [created]. There was some communication—they would ask us— "Where did you learn your craft? Where else have you done business? "I like this dish."

¹²⁹ Michael Ruhlman. "Role Play." *Food Arts*, November 1999.

¹³⁰ Dana Hactic. "Restaurant Reservation App Tock Just Raised \$7.5M." *Eater*, October 5, 2016. <https://www.eater.com/2016/10/5/13174664/reservation-app-nick-kokonas-tock-7-million>.

Now, when people arrive, [they already know all about what we cook and who we are]. Above all, it is because everybody shares things through Instagram and you could go to [a restaurant] and know what is going on right now to eat.

There has been a change in the way we experience. It used to be a surprise, but now I imagine it must be like going to the opera. When you go to the opera you already know what is going to happen in each act, “Now he will kill her” or “Now they will kiss.” You are already expecting each [point of the plot] and enjoying the experience in a different way.

[Eating at a restaurant was not an] experience that you could start having before arriving to the restaurant. It gives us an opportunity to reach further into our emotions. If in the past you only kept the surprise, now you can dive in each dish—search for things even further of what you already know you will get. I believe perception has changed a lot, [and this change that media creates] a new opportunity [for us] to explain things that are further than a dish itself.¹³¹

And fine dining chefs have seized this opportunity to explain “things that are further than a dish itself” through digital media. Out of 75 chefs represented in the World’s 50 Best Restaurants (top 50), *only* 15 chefs do not have a public & personal Instagram pages (that means that 80% of them do). But out of the 20% that do not have public and personal Instagrams, many of them use their restaurant’s Instagram as a quasi-personal Instagram. What is unclear from the correlation of top chefs posting on digital media is what the causation is— is their fame a result of their media engagement, or do they feel that they need to be active on digital media in order to reach that fame? It seems as though a new and crucial part of being a food industry professional is joining the online community of top chefs via online content creation and engagement. This separates part, not all, of chefs’ food text



Figure 27: Illustration by Tom Klare, featured in Michael Ruhlman. “Role Play.” Food Arts, November 1999.

¹³¹ Jordi Roca, and Héloïse Vilaseca. Pastry chef of the restaurant El Celler de Can Roca and Head of Innovation Lab. Interview by Vicky Zeamer. Translated by Marc Exposito, October 30, 2017.

creation from the realm of being 21st century marketing. Instead, it situates much of their food text creation into identity formation and community building amongst their peers.

Networked social media provides an opportunity for chefs to individually forge an identity of a creative agent that surpasses their identity of as an actor within a broader group, such as their restaurant. Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman said, “[people] have become increasingly networked as individuals, rather than embedded in groups. In the world of networked individuals, it is the person who is the focus: not the family, not the work unit, not the neighborhood, and not the social group.”¹³² Or in the food industry’s case, not the restaurant. Instead, the chef of a restaurant is able to establish themselves as an individual while also taking part in community discourse. This also sheds light onto why a majority of top fine dining chefs have their own personal Instagram accounts versus leaving *all* of their social media content creation up to a PR team or even the main Instagram or social media account of the restaurants they work within.

However, chefs’ content creation is not just for prospective diners—there is a rich digital community of chefs that have emerged out of these Instagram posts. Chef Jordi Roca mentioned that while he does not get a chance to convene with other Spanish chefs as much as before, he still feels close to them as they all follow each other on social media and can share what they are working on.¹³³ It is very common to see chefs and restaurant professionals comment and like each other’s posts. It is important to take into account that these are the very top chefs, and an appropriate metaphor may be if Mick Jagger had “liked” one of Bob Dylan’s posts on Instagram. So, while the main audience these chefs create content for is each other (other chefs and food industry friends), it also means that that mainstream food culture can witness these food community bonds form and ideas circulate.

A major shift in the chef role is that the public perception of the food industry has been glamorized. Arhun Mahendro of Badmaash, a modern Indian restaurant in Los Angeles, described the new role perceptions of chefs to *The Los Angeles Times*,

We’re in a really cool time: We’ve been doing the same thing every day but the culture and the way we’re perceived in public has completely changed. I remember being head busser at this restaurant in Toronto and I was embarrassed; at that time it wasn’t so cool to work in a

¹³² Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, Reprint edition (The MIT Press, 2014).

¹³³ Jordi Roca, and Héloïse Vilaseca. Pastry chef of the restaurant El Celler de Can Roca and Head of Innovation Lab. Interview by Vicky Zeamer. Translated by Marc Exposito, October 30, 2017.

restaurant. Now you're in this club where everyone who's not in it is trying to get in it. There's this crazy perception that when we're dehydrated we drink Cristal. When we're hungry we eat imported beef or something. But we're still here, 14 hours a day, if we're not on the floor we're in the office sweating because there's no air conditioning.¹³⁴

What affordances are restaurants given now, with this wider food culture status, that maybe they wouldn't have been able to make economically feasible a few decades in the past? The food industry is progressively diving into discussions about the dynamics surrounding a food experiences are shaped and perceived. Instead, culture has accepted food as a subject worthy of a multidimensional inquiries from those in and out of the food industry. Food culture is cool now.

Take, for instance, chefs and a few members of the science community who have joined forces to invigorate understanding of food related opportunities enabled by scientific approaches. In October 2016, a conference commenced called "Brainy Tongue" in the Basque Culinary Center in Spain. The conference sought to explore the intersection of culinary conceptual understandings and empirical knowledge of neuroscience, through asking questions such as: "What stimuli do we receive when we eat: How do we perceive and integrate them...What role do expectations play during a tasting menu?"¹³⁵ These questions are crucial to not only the food itself, but the restaurant and branding as well.

These questions emerged not just from a curiosity of how the brain works around the dining experience, but more interestingly, how expectations of diners impacting their experiences within a restaurant. It is easy to fall into a hole of neuroscience explanations for perception and experience behavior, but I digress. What is seemingly missing from this inquiry of the role of expectations in the dining experience is an understanding of what exactly these expectations are and how they are formed. *I contend that social and visual media has become the domineering cultivator of expectations around visual food experiences.* In turn, food are objects to be used as symbols and signs of narrative elements of stories being told by chefs.

¹³⁴ Amy Scattergood, "What Does It Mean to Be a Chef in Los Angeles in 2017? We Asked a Few of Them." *latimes.com*. Accessed April 9, 2018. <http://www.latimes.com/food/dailydish/la-dd-talking-to-los-angeles-chefs-20170422-htmistory.html>.

¹³⁵ "Event: The Sensory Logic of the Gastronomic Brain." *Brainy Tongue* (blog), October 2016. <http://brainytongue.com/>.

But first, let us zoom out to understand the landscape of tension in the fine dining world around the proliferation of visual food texts through digital platforms. The consensus of fine dining chefs is that they are using their food to tell a story about an ingredient, a process, a memory, and much more. The food is a vessel for these messages, in the same ways that poetry, art, or film function as a medium. With this in mind, food is a medium for communication, not just a utility for visceral sensation and sustenance. In fact, most fine dining chefs do want the whole dining experience to be powered by themselves and their creative visions. For example, Dani Lasa, Head of Creativity + Research at Mugaritz in Basque Country, Spain, pointed out:

We are not making food for pleasure but for emotion. Maybe that is the most challenging part. When you have totally changed your model, it is not a service, but an experience, a business. When you go to a concert or a gallery, why not ask the musician or the painter to change the art because you do not like it. There is no option once you go there; you are in our hands.¹³⁶

The food produced in fine dining establishments often carry along these dimensions of storytelling and perceptual intrigue, but what chefs tend to disagree on how these stories as told through food can only carry weight in the physical world. The perspective that visual food media is completely removed from the experience of physically dining is still held by some notable chefs. When I asked Chef Ludo Lefebvre, the restaurateur behind Los Angeles's Trois Mec, how he viewed the future of food as mediated by social media in 2016 at Harvard, he asserted that there was no future in digital mediums for food. The real power of food, he suggested, is the experience—the flavors, the company—and that could not be conveyed through a digital form. Many other chefs, designers, and hospitality experts have and will continue to respond with the same sentiment: that an authentic food experience involves a number of sensorial elements including the taste of food hitting the tongue, the setting, and equally as important, the company of people. From these components emerge a narrative, as I have pointed out previously. The narrative surrounding food needs more than an image, as Lefebvre said, and others within the fine dining world agree. Some fine dining chefs

¹³⁶ Dani Lasa, as cited in Zeamer, Vicky. "At Mugaritz, Going Beyond the Pleasure Principle to Create 'Techno-Emotional' Cuisine." MOLD :: Designing the Future of Food. Accessed November 4, 2017. <https://thisismold.com/process/cook/at-mugaritz-going-beyond-the-pleasure-principle-to-create-techno-emotional-cuisine>.

often talk about their creations (their food) as mediums for communication but only to be accurately interacted with in the physical world.

Some chefs have tried to fight the proliferation of diner-taken food photography in their restaurants. A television segment from Marina Etxezarreta that ran on Spanish television explains that while Basque chefs do not want to put up posters saying “no photos,” as the chefs do not want to impede on the experience for diners, chefs are very particular with their image. The Head Chef of the about 80-year old restaurant Arzak, Juan Mari Arzak, recalls that techno-emotional gourmet food innovator Ferran Adrià emailed him once asking why his food looked so bad in a photo. Arzak responds that he was not the one who took the photo. Along this same sentiment, the restaurant has clear boundaries for when and why diners can or cannot take photos of their dining experience. If a diner wants to take a photo for their own personal use and they are not disturbing the experience for others, they get the green light to take their own photos. However, if they are taking a photo for the blog or for public use, they they get the red light, and they need to ask the Arzak team to send you a professional quality photo from their innovation lab.¹³⁷

In other words, diners are expected to not share their own photos on social media. Instead, the Chef and restaurant’s creative team views themselves as the one’s ultimately responsible for controlling the messages (in this case, through images) that emerge from the restaurant and the dining experience.

¹³⁷ Marina Etxezarreta interviews Juan Mari Azak, Head Chef of Arzak on Photos in Restaurants. San Sebastian, Spain, n.d.

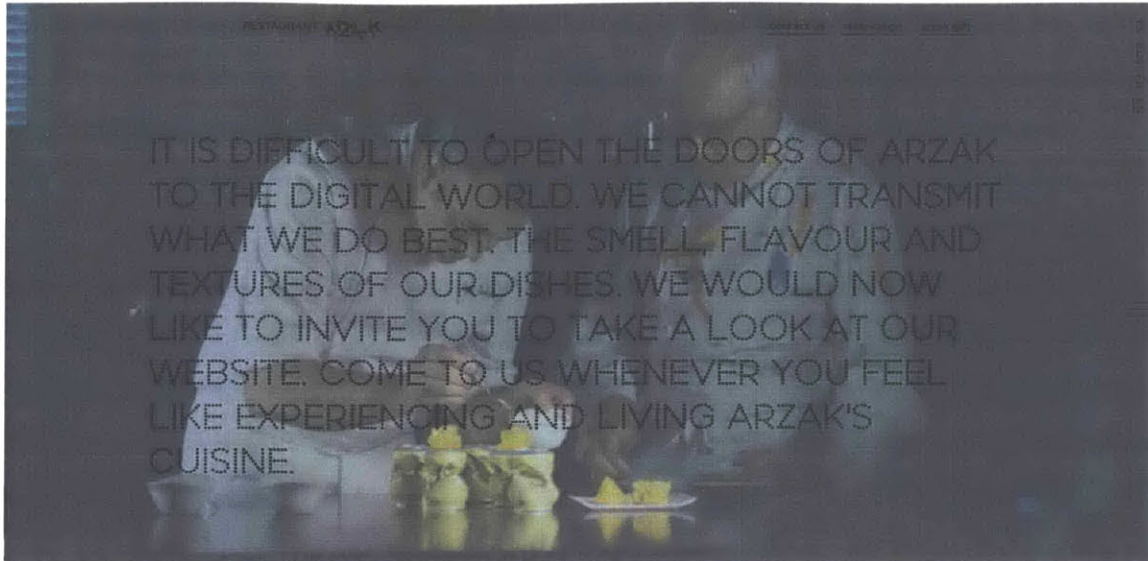


Figure 28: "Homepage of Arzak, "It is difficult to open the doors of Arzak to the digital world. We cannot transmit what we do best. The smell, flavor and textures of our dishes. We would now like to invite you to take a look at our website. Come to us whenever you feel like experiencing and living Arzak's cuisine" (October 2017)

The declaration that the restaurant and its creations can only be experienced by dining at the restaurant concurrently legitimizes the standing of visual food culture online has become a domineering force within mainstream food culture. That is to say, visual food culture seems to be a trend that the food industry cannot stop but at the same time, the restaurant experiences are about more—the experiences are about living the cuisine through smells, flavors, and textures. The concerns about representational accuracy give voice to the fear that fine dining chefs see these visual representations of food as having the potential to negate the experience the chef has tried to create within their own dining rooms.

Likewise, chefs are increasingly understanding the power of food representations in a digital ecosystem to act as extensions for these narratives that the chefs wish to share with their audience, either diners or simply the viewers of the food texts. As a result, many chefs have actually embraced the use of visual media for food text production in order to extend the narratives that are built around the food, from the cultivation and creation of the dishes to the dining room experience of the finished meal.

In particular, some professionals in the fine dining world are beginning to try to connect the social life of food texts through digital media to the experiences that diners have in physical restaurant spaces. In this chapter I will show how a few exemplary

famous chefs use visual media distributed digitally to extend their stories and therefore build cultural capital.

It is important to emphasize that digital media platforms and their content are not democratizing food, as more people are not gaining access to exclusive restaurants. Instead, digital media representations of food allow more people to view and interact with the food-based narratives that are commonly embedded in fine dining dishes and processes.

Social media becomes a way to extend the transmission of food-based narratives from fine dining restaurants for symbolic capital growth in a way that has never been so accessible to the mainstream, global, food culture community. By the status of being a fine dining institution, certain elements of a restaurant become publicly obscured while others are brazenly amplified. For example, the issue of price is unspoken because it can be considered gauche. But the process of preparing the food is dictated by a meal experience “captain” who guides you through the various courses, including but not limited to the source of the seeds of the vegetables you are eating and the old-world fermentation process of the fish on your plate. This tendency mirrors the sentiment of the beginning of the gourmet dining movement in the U.S. in the second half of the 20th century. That is, the pleasure of not just preparing but also enjoying an elaborate meal was only accessible to affluent diners and industry leaders, as opposed to average Americans who instead needed to focus their time and money on “traditional” American foodways that would feed a family efficiently.¹³⁸ This may be true for aspirational gourmands, but many people would desire meat and potatoes instead.

¹³⁸ David Strauss, “Conclusion.” *Setting the Table for Julia Child: Gourmet Dining in America, 1934–1961*, 1 edition., 248–49. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

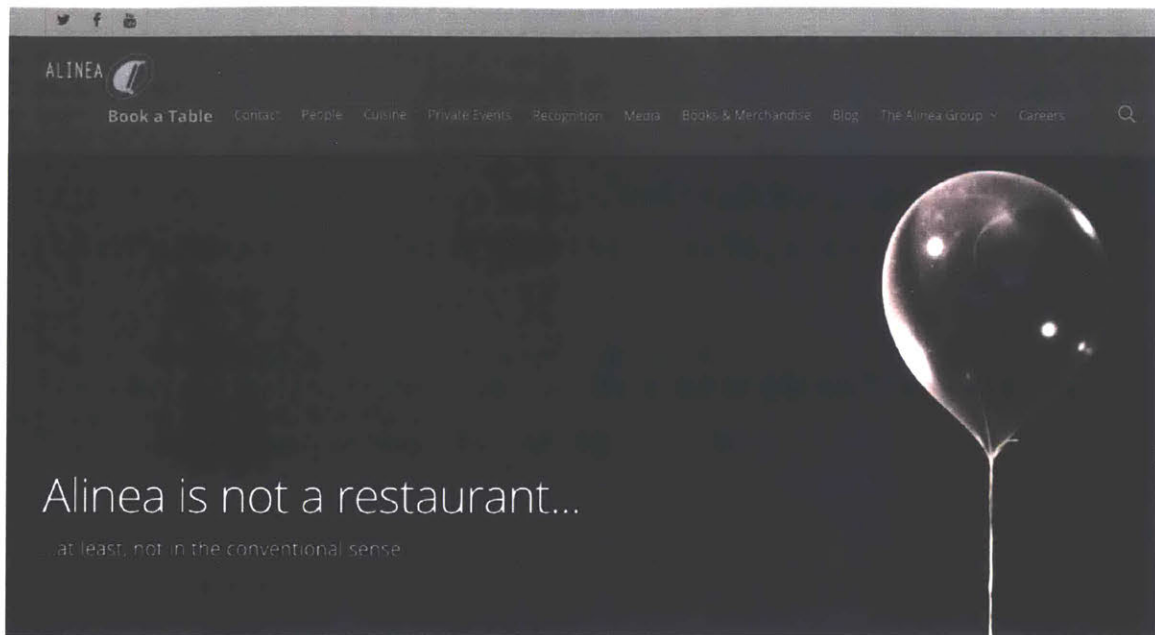


Figure 29: Splash page of the Alinea website declares, “Alinea is not a restaurant... at least, not in the conventional sense.”¹³⁹

One way a restaurant is given the license to unabashedly embrace the narrative elements of food creation and consumption is by explicitly earning respect via the industry and its awarding systems. Particularly within the field of cultural production, a restaurant’s main social and economic dimensions fall into one camp or another: restricted production or large-scale production. Fine dining restaurants typically fall into the camp of restricted production where, “competition between agents are largely symbolic, involving prestige, consecration and artistic celebrity.”¹⁴⁰ Alinea is one of 12 restaurants in the U.S. that have earned 3-Michelin Stars.¹⁴¹ This standing communicates prestige to industry professionals and fine dining clientele. To the chefs and creative teams, this standing gives way to a sense of artistic celebrity. In particular, being adorned Michelin with the highest of the highest rankings grants them a quasi-creative license to pursue an art form that transcends a simple experience of consuming food—in a sense, Alinea is able to perform a spectacular experience through the aid of food as a medium. While the success may very well be adorned in money, the symbolic capital being raised is understood to be the most important return for a chef.

¹³⁹ “Alinea.” Alinea (blog), 2018. <https://alinearestaurant.com/site/>.

¹⁴⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*. Edited by Randal Johnson. 1st edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. 15.

¹⁴¹ “Alinea.” Alinea (blog), 2018. <https://alinearestaurant.com/site/>.



Figure 30: Further down on the Alinea splash page, "We continue to push ourselves and our patrons to rethink what a restaurant can be. We look forward to sharing the Alinea experience with you."

However, in a food culture where the public discourse can make or break a restaurant's reputation by way of negative Instagram posts and concurrent dwindling reservations that force a restaurant to close, a chef and their restaurant does not only need to speak to an industry-insider or prestigious award-granting body. In fact, the chef is pressured to explain their and their restaurant's merits to a wider body of food culture fiends. That is, chefs need to speak to the digitally enabled "foodies" in addition to the Michelin raters.

Many chefs of top restaurants today are active on Instagram. Mike Bagale is the Executive Chef at Alinea, and is just one of those chefs who are constantly syncing visual narratives about the process of culinary creation onto the photography-based social networking platform. Bagale's posts tend to be about one of these three experiences of being both a chef and someone within the food industry: experimenting with ingredients/building dishes, finished dishes, and culinary experiences outside of his own restaurant where he acknowledges another chef/industry organization. Through these three perspectives, followers are shown the creative role of a chef, the artistic product of their work, and also the social dynamics of being a food industry figure. Furthermore, these perspectives demonstrate the actions that Bagale has described as

his motivations for working to maintain such a progressive restaurant, “I want to be a participant in something extraordinary. A contributor. A leader. That’s all.”¹⁴²

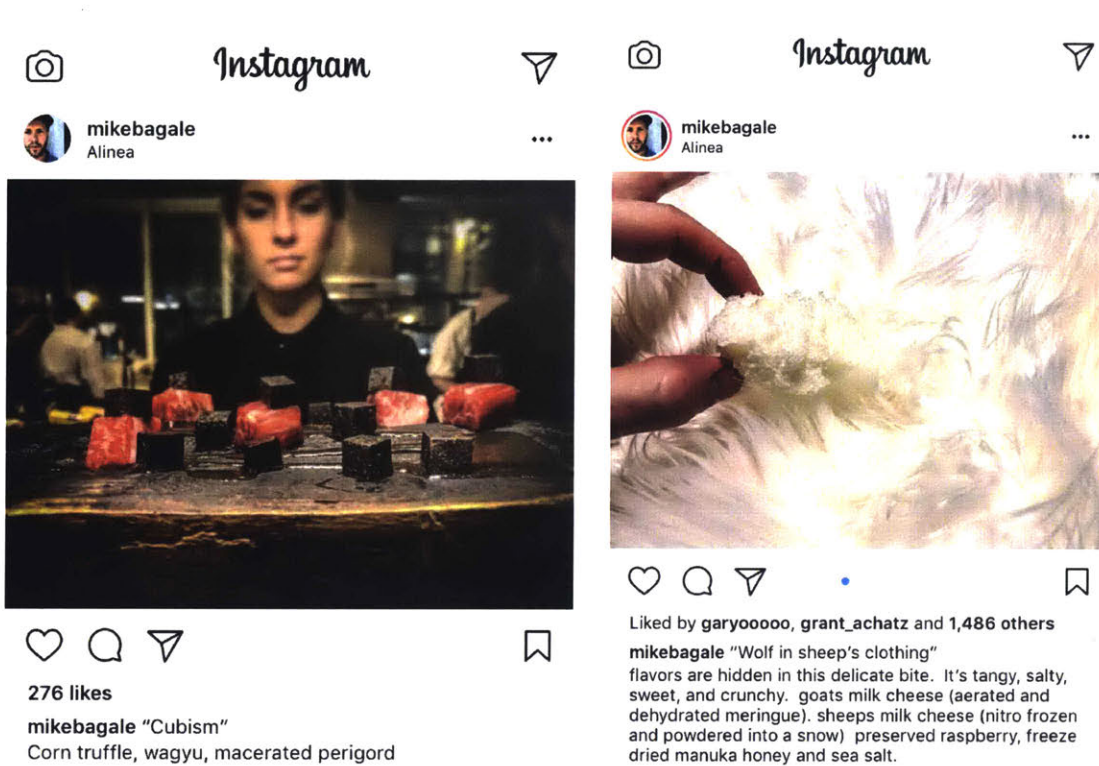


Figure 31: (left) Mike Bagale’s post from February 5, 2018, (right) post from January 24, 2018

Working along Bagale is Grant Achatz who is the Co-Founder and Chef at Alinea, has used another form of digital media to tell his side of the Alinea story. Achatz is the focus of one episode of Netflix’s Chef’s Table. Why do the world’s top Chefs open up for cameras for digital streaming website? There is power to be gained from exposure of Netflix. In 2017, the number of Netflix subscribers in the US surpassed the number of pay-TV subscribers for the first time.¹⁴³ Netflix has a lower barrier to entry than most pay-TV packages because as of 2018, Netflix costs \$10.98 per month for access to the full catalog via any internet connection (on a phone, tablet, laptop, connected television), where the most basic traditional TV plan can cost more than \$20 and requires a monthly rental of a cable box and remote. Netflix is able to assess what types of content users

¹⁴² “Mike Bagale.” Chef’s Roll, June 7, 2016. <https://chefsroll.com/cheflife/featured-chefs/mike-bagale>.

¹⁴³ Ian Morris, “Netflix Is Now Bigger Than Cable TV.” Forbes, June 13, 2017. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ianmorris/2017/06/13/netflix-is-now-bigger-than-cable-tv/>.

like and suggest other relevant titles, so the “right” content for viewers are more likely to be suggested to them.¹⁴⁴ And some of Netflix’s original content, such as Chef’s Table, are very well-done and can rival big Hollywood studio productions in terms of quality. Chef’s Table comes from director David Gelb, who also directed Jiro Dreams of Sushi. Chef’s Table won the Best Episodic Series Award at the 2015 International Documentary Association Awards, and therefore, the series has been recognized as meeting high film industry standards.¹⁴⁵ With these factors in mind, being profiled on a professionally directed series that is accessible at any moment of the day to millions of people all over the world gives a huge potential for increasing the public interest in their own restaurant, and more broadly, gastronomy.

Back to the story of Chef’s Table episode, Achatz is outward about how he aims to change people’s experiences with food. The Alinea episode of Chef’s Table opens with him discussing the limitations of the norms surrounding eating food. “As a chef... we [are] limited to scale as determined by plate manufacturers... why not a tablecloth we can eat off of,” Achatz questions, “Why do we have to eat with a fork or a spoon?”¹⁴⁶ By questioning every detail of the food-consumption practice, down to the plates and tables people eat off of, he is taking the discussion surrounding food and expanding it outside of the food itself. What are the nuances of food? What norms dictate discourse about food? How does the context impact the experience? These questions beckon food culture’s discourse to acknowledge how multi-disciplinary food experiences are within society.

¹⁴⁴ Angela Watercutter. “Netflix Is Using ‘The Defenders’ to Understand Its Audience.” WIRED, August 22, 2017. <https://www.wired.com/story/netflix-the-defenders-audience-data/>.

¹⁴⁵ “IDA Documentary Awards 2015.” International Documentary Association. Accessed April 9, 2018. <https://www.documentary.org/awards2015>.

¹⁴⁶ Brian McGinn, director. “Grant Achatz.” Chef’s Table. Netflix, Season 2, Episode 1, 27 May 2016.



Figure 32: A "captain" (Achatz's terminology for the server that guides the diners through the meal experience) in Alinea cuts off a flower from a hanging table centerpiece in order to place it onto the table as part of the food. By doing this transformation of the dining space into an active arena for consumption, the experience of eating food is also given new dimensions of complexity and engagement. (as shown in Chef's Table).

It is clear that Achatz sees himself in the realm of artists as the opening scene of his episode of Chef's Table uses a camera rotating around him to capture his still and steady gaze on a canvas of a painting larger than himself. His gaze is not just one of appreciation, but also of inquiry as he voice-over narrates his questioning of the conventions of dining, and how he can create a new experience outside of the norm (as discussed earlier). Achatz's spirit can thus be similar to Paul Cézanne's, who compared his own role as a painter as having the power to, "observe nature...to imagine the world as it was before it had been converted into a network of concepts and objects."¹⁴⁷ In Chef's Table, Achatz and a colleague are shown "painting" a tablecloth with food, using spoons instead of brushes, as diners sit at the table watching chefs create their next meal. While Achatz acknowledges that he has drawn on other artistic mediums for inspiration, he and many other chefs also choose to abide by Western conventions of using color very purposefully, and reactively sparingly, and reverting back to a more monotone palate. For example, food is typically served on black or white plates in fine dining institutions to emphasize the color in the food.

¹⁴⁷ David Batchelor. "Chromophobia." *In Color, The Film Reader*, edited by Angela Dalle Vacche and Brian Price, 70. New York ; London: Routledge, 2006.

Consuming food has taken on the purpose of performance and power narrative through the affordances of visual media. Food continues to transcend the physical experience of being consumed by the mouth, tongue, and the stomach. Instead, food is consumed through the eyes and imagination of its consumer. Achatz says that many chefs want to be known for things that they do with the knife, such as sautéing or cutting, but he views the most important part of being a chef as passing an idea to the diner. With this statement, the diner is given the real power to transform their food into more than just food (ideas, inspiration, happiness). James Beard Award-winning food critic Francis Lam also acknowledges this transformative power of the Alinea dining experience, “[it is disguised as a restaurant,] but in reality, you are having an experience you can decide is dinner, or theatre, or performance, or therapy, or whatever the hell you walk away feeling and thinking about.”¹⁴⁸



Figure 33: Assembling of "Tropical Fruit with Rum, Vanilla, Kaffir Lime" at Alinea (as shown in Chef's Table)

Bagale and Achatz are certainly not the first nor the last top chefs to view their work more as a process of creative expression than food production, and thus, more closely aligned with narrative formation than utility. Molecular gastronomy Godfather Ferran Adrià famously said that actually cooking food is the least exciting aspect of being a chef for him, as he much prefers the creative process and culture surrounding the opportunities of exploration and communication available in fine dining.¹⁴⁹ Adrià is currently spearheading the Bullipedia project, a series of books and online database that details not only the molecular gastronomy techniques developed in the elBulí kitchen, but additionally, the whole history of western culinary arts. The project was announced in 2012 and as of 2018, Adrià announced that the finished project would not be producing

¹⁴⁸ Brian McGinn, director. "Grant Achatz." Chef's Table. Netflix, Season 2, Episode 1, 27 May 2016.

¹⁴⁹ AJ+. Chef Ferran Adria Is Getting Ready To Blow Your Mind Again. Accessed April 9, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3bYqCBNUuo>.

its ambitious online database and instead be mostly a series of 35 books, coming in at over 17,500 pages.¹⁵⁰

There is no official statement as to why the online database has been abandoned, but the decision to release 35 books at around \$100 each over 4 years is one that reflects narrow thinking as to the audience of these books—culinary professionals with the time and resources to not just purchase and read, but also store, a monolithic encyclopedia of in-depth food history. This message speaks in contrast to how the Bullipedia project was originally announced as an open way for people across the world to share information, and for it to include tools and open API's and SDK so that people across fields can draw from the information of the Wiki. Specifically, Adrià said, that access to the wiki will cost less than a book... and now the alternative form of the project will cost over \$3500 for the full-set.¹⁵¹

The media infrastructure that chefs create food texts within must be assessed if Adrià and other fine dining food creatives want to create and engage in discourse about the importance of food culture and its nuances. For example, chefs that actively participate in social media talk about enjoying the community and people and sharing of ideas that allows their industry to feel more connected. However, creating a sense of community and shared culture does not emerge from content creation but rather the concatenation of creation and engagement with content. Specifically, Michael Warner points out that texts do not create a public themselves, meaning that a single post does not create a social media network, but instead it is the aggregation of texts paired with a reliable base of participants and audiences that creates a shared context for interactions.¹⁵² In other words, distribution of information is a key component of creating a sense of shared community.

¹⁵⁰ Hillary Dixler Canavan, "Ferran Adrià's Bullipedia Will Be 17,500 Pages Long." Eater, February 12, 2018. <https://www.eater.com/2018/2/12/16997584/ferran-adria-bullipedia-books-titles-on-sale>.

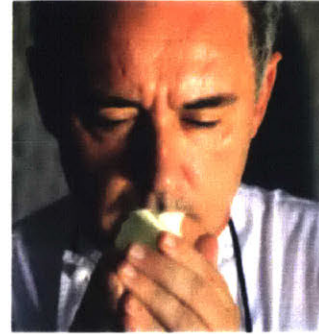
¹⁵¹ Gabe Ulla, "Ferran Adrià Announces BulliPedia Details; Watch an Exclusive Video Preview." Eater, October 25, 2012. <https://www.eater.com/2012/10/25/6530557/ferran-adria-announces-bullipedia-details-watch-an-exclusive-video>.

¹⁵² Josh Braun, "Social Media and Distribution Studies," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 1 (April 29, 2015): 2056305115580483, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115580483>.

La Bullipedia

The world's first culinary Wiki

La Bullipedia will be an online database which will hold every bit of gastronomic knowledge ever uncovered. It is being created by Ferran Adrià - Molecular gastronome extraordinaire, widely regarded as the world's best chef – and Telefónica Digital who will help bring his vision to life, bringing technology to the core of La Bullipedia.

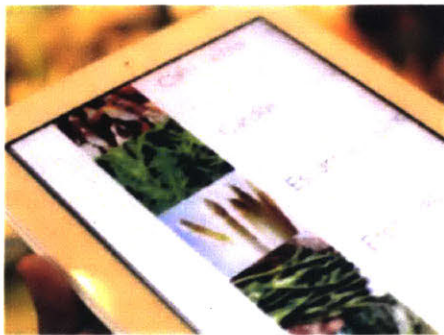


The background

- Ferran Adrià shocked the world in July 2011 by closing his award-winning elBulli restaurant in order to found the elBulli Foundation. The venture is a centre of innovation allied with digital technology that would place haute cuisine under the microscope and provide a place for culinary innovation.
- Adrià's approach to cuisine has been around research and the accumulation of data which he has used rigorously and recorded meticulously in order to create a database which underpins his work.
- Telefonica Digital has been working closely with Ferran Adrià and his team to explore the possibilities of 'Digital Food' since 2010.
- The data within La Bullipedia will be shared so advanced data mining and analytics can take place. APIs and SDK will allow 3rd parties to write plugins that expand the creative toolset of the Wiki.

What is it?

- La Bullipedia will contain past gastronomic discoveries, rules and recipes, latest developments and creations which will come from Senor Ferran Adrià's very own gastronomic R&D lab – the taller.
- The wiki will be interactive which allows users to post their own suggestions for new recipes, flavor combinations and culinary concepts



The belief system

- Cuisine can be driven, not by ingredients, but by chemistry, physics, psychology, mechanics and technique.
- In order for cuisine to innovate there must be openness and a departure from the traditional model of chef secrecy.
- Creative platforms like La Bullipedia can happen in other domains beyond cuisine that rely on innovative knowledge, such as architecture.



Figure 34: Fact sheet on Bullipedia from October, 2012 (Source: Eater)

Subsequently, the failure of Bullipedia demonstrates how ambitious, open, food communication projects on a digital scale can be difficult to realize. Bullipedia's original vision was, in a way, the amplified voices of many fine dining chefs who have come together on Instagram to share culinary creativity and history as well as build bonds with each other. However, Bullipedia's goal was to be a centralized hub of information when today, food culture is more distributed than ever. Maybe that was part of the challenge? Regardless, the pricing of the book series says it all: exclusivity not communication. We can only speculate on why the fate of Bullipedia turned out the way it was and if there might be some digital life still in it, is yet to be seen. At any rate, fine dining chefs, in addition to diners across the world, have embraced the process of cultural production within the food community via digital media production and consumption. Perhaps a centralized repository was not the right media move in a time of media convergence—and maybe it is a good thing that the western food culture narrative will remain diffused across the World Wide Web.

Conclusion

What are the possible future of these chefs who either play the social media game or opt-out? The chefs that chose to play the game have star power potential that conveys not only the exclusivity of their restaurants, but more importantly, they have an opportunity to craft a compelling creative narrative that can extend their impact beyond the walls of their restaurants. Chefs and other fine dining industry professionals that minimize the role of digital social media and accessibility to their own created food texts will be left out of a growing global food culture.

In review, what has changed about food culture and what does it have to do with the internet and communication technologies? Food culture has shifted into a convergence culture, enabled by digital media infrastructures such as social media platforms, where the role of producers and consumers interact as a group of digitally. The advent of Web 1.0, Web 2.0, and easily available camera phones, have empowered people to create and engage with the bulk of media concerning food available via the internet. So while it is not the instructional messages of cookbooks that have shifted purpose as people still use recipes to cook, food texts have taken new forms and functions that lead to more opportunities for discourse within food culture. Additionally, expectations and breadth of the community that cooks, diners, users, and others have acquired through the convergence of food texts in the digital age is changing how people perceive a global food culture.

Representations of food are layered with narrative elements that the person preparing or sharing the food and/or its representations are able to represent that person. Digital media have amplified the communicative elements of depictions of food through enabling spreadable images and videos of food. Food has been a rich vessel for socio-cultural meaning for millennia, but now it can be used as a symbol far beyond the dinner table. But if food culture is not careful, the richness of food culture can be reduced to statements of lifestyle status while minimizing the labor, sourcing, and values that go into food's production and consumption.

How can social media platforms allow for the richness of food as a topic to be explored in greater depth rather than a snapshot of a finished meal? I believe that such video features like Snapchat or Instagram's stories features allows for chefs and food producers to share their perspective on process with a low-effort entry barrier. I wonder

how diners can also extend their narratives through food to be more robust than simply “I ate at this fancy restaurant.” Yes, this is my call for food porn on Instagram and elsewhere in media to stand for more than pretty photos or exclusive dining!

Concerning the future of social media users that consider themselves within food culture, I ask you them this:

What story are you sharing when you share a photo of a meal? Why are you taking a photo of that meal, even if you won’t be sharing it with others?

What about the meal experience do you find most joy in? How does that joy relate to the social or culinary aspects of the meal, and how can you enrich that memory either by taking photos or choosing not to take photos?

Once you have figured out why these photos of food are so alluring to you, I challenge you to imagine how you can enrich your life further by embracing those elements of food text creation (health, social connections, supporting local agriculture/food systems, sustainability, etc.). Food culture is getting better and better as time progresses, but it is the responsibility of each person who cares about food to not allow food culture to become a shell of conspicuous consumption instead of the rich food world that we all know *does* exist beyond social media platforms.

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